How did Mainstream Hollywood Cinema respond to the Political Zeitgeist following the 9/11 attacks?

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ABSTRACT

The Al Qaeda attacks against the United States on September 11th 2001 and the subsequent War on Terror fostered a variety of Hollywood responses from militaristic films that capitalized on pro- American sentiment to socially liberal 'awards fare', critical of the Bush administration. Yet I argue that most salient of the Bush era were a key series of blockbuster films directed by Steven Spielberg and Christopher Nolan which captured the zeitgeist in the form of dystopian narratives and mise en scene, direct references to neo-conservative policy and conflicted central characters. I postulate that this cycle begins with the civil liberties themed futuristic thriller *Minority Report* in 2002 and climaxes dramatically with 2008's *The Dark Knight*, a superhero film which encapsulates the previous eight years of Bush rule. These narratives provide a counter narrative against the unilateralist Bush administration with their images of economic and political decline and social disarray. Central here are the works of Douglas Kellner, Stephen Prince and Dan Hassler-Frost who have analysed mainstream Hollywood's cinematic responses to the attacks, particularly in a neo-conservative context. I also consider reviews by critics in generating the cultural and political impact of these films.

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Introduction

I present a series of case studies which correlate with the political journey of the United States undertaken during the years following the 9/11 attacks. As well as examining the political importance behind the authorial decisions of these films, I also cite them as having a sophistication overlooked by critics due to their complex exploration of post 9/11 issues such as curtailment of civil liberties, pre-emptive war and fears of domestic terrorist insurgence.

I begin with *Minority Report* (2002) which I posit represents the first example of a film that elicited a thematic relevance to the attacks as well as a critique of resonant civil liberties issues following the topical implementation of the Patriot Act. I also cite the film as generating a dystopian mise en scene that is renewed throughout numerous science fiction and comic book films of the Bush era. My second case study of *Batman Begins* (2005) represents a further mainstream subversion by using the all American superhero to launch a critique against the 'blowback' consequences of US neo-conservative and Reaganite foreign policy. My third case study of *War of the Worlds* (2005) refers vividly to post 9/11 vernacular and captures the sour nature of post 9/11 America with its depressed apocalyptic imagery of an immolated US east coast. Finally, the 2008 release of *The Dark Knight* serves to confirm this cycle with its politically despairing allegory of the Bush years of warrantless wiretapping and extraordinary rendition against the contextual backdrop of an optimistic presidential campaign led by Barack Obama.

I recognise that not all pertinent issues of post 9/11 debate are included in these pages. I focus principally on the anxieties of domestic and foreign policy these films recall from their various releases in the Bush administration tenure. Whilst I appreciate that their narratives have significant racial and ethnic implications, which might be the subject of a further study, in depth consideration of these is beyond the scope of this analysis.

In this analysis, I reference a selection of key literature which addresses the cultural impact of the 'War on Terror' on mainstream American Cinema. Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush and Cheney Era* (2009) chronicles the interaction of American politics and film culture throughout the Bush presidency. *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and The War on Terror* (2010) by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell presents a series of case studies by international scholars on cinema and the 9/11 attacks, exploring popular film as a locus of domestic anxiety as well as reflection of incumbent, neo-conservative discourse. The latter element is most salient in Justine Toh's essay on Batman Begins, 'The Tools and Toys of (the) War (on Terror): Consumer Desire, Military Fetish and Regime Change' which explores the narrative's complex relationship with the ideological thrust of George W. Bush's first term. In contrast, Stephen Prince's *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009) investigates whether the 9/11 attacks constituted a major change in Hollywood practice and how poetic licence was practised due to the human tragedy of the attacks as well as the politically tumultuous context of the Bush administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

These case studies effectively give narrative to the development of response and public feeling towards the War on Terror. They also, within their ostensibly mainstream narratives, represent a melancholy attack on the doctrines of Reaganism and American imperialism in their depictions of US foreign, economic and domestic policy. Their shaping of the zeitgeist is also facilitated by a critical response which often fetes these films' nuanced and complex politics.

Chapter 1: *Minority Report* and the new neo-conservative mood

The release of *Minority Report* in 2002, a year after the 9/11 attacks set a curious precedent and new style of mise en scene for cinema's narrative and thematic response to the attacks. Though filmed prior to the attacks, *Minority Report's* dystopian storyline corresponded with the haunted and damaged mood of the nation. Its themes of untrammelled government power, personal loss and conspiracy were palpably relevant for a nation reeling from 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror. The film also imbued a mood for future post 9/11 big budget productions with its autumnal imagery and East Coast setting which would be recalled in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*. This could be starkly contrasted with films which represented a sense of broader post 9/11 militarism such as the rushed releases of *Black Hawk Down* and *Behind Enemy Lines* over the previous year. Yet it should also be stated that the film critics' own personal political perceptions were a key aspect of the film's post 9/11 resonance. An acute politicization was read into Spielberg's film - one which would be replicated in mainstream Hollywood blockbusters across the George W. Bush era.

The year following 9/11 had been politically seismic. Following the fallout from the attacks on the Pentagon in Washington and the World Trade Center in New York, a major coalition of countries assembled for a war against the Al Qaeda sheltering Taliban regime of Afghanistan on October 7th, 2001, anticipating a climate of pre-emptive war throughout the following decade. Domestically, major legislation was signed in the form of the Patriot Act on 26th October 2001. The legislation would lead to an unprecedented expansion in police and government power, eroding

conventional notions of civil liberties. The Federal government could now monitor

religious, political and other institutions without any suspicion of criminal activity to

develop terror investigations. Probable cause could be suspended to serve

combating terrorism, as could the established practice of habeas corpus, limiting

civilian rights and the rule of law. Even librarians were affected as the government

could prosecute keepers of records for telling anyone if the government had

subpoenaed information for a terror investigation.[1] The legislation created a mood

of nebulousness and fear. This is recalled by the political journalist Chris Finan who

reflected on the passage of the act in autumn 2001:

> *We didn't miss a thing in our planning. We had drafted a statement
> that provided a detailed overview of the new dangers to free
> speech. We had worked to secure important speakers, including the
> executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the
> Press, who we felt sure would help draw reporters alarmed by
> government restrictions on their efforts to cover the detention of
> more than one thousand Muslim men as well as the war in
> Afghanistan. Representative Patsy Mink of Hawaii would speak of
> her fear that the country was on a path leading to Civil Liberties
> abuses similar to the internment of Japanese Americans in World
> War 2.[2]*

Mink's fears of a World War 2 style militaristic containment proved prescient when

in 2002, the US leased land of Guantanamo in Cuba became a site for a military

prison designed to hold war captives and suspected terrorist combatants. Tom

Malinowki encapsulates the danger of the institution in a July 2008 article, conveying

the extremes of the Bush administration's security apparatus:

> *Suspected terrorists would be held indefinitely without charge, or
> tried before military commissions that denied basic due process,
> rather than brought before civilian courts. In addition, the CIA was*

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[1] Dixon, 2004, page 3.
[2] Finan, 2008, page 269.

> *authorised to seize terrorist suspects anywhere in the world (including, as it turns out, off the streets of democratic countries like Italy) and send them for interrogation to third countries where torture is routinely practised.*[3]

A new zeitgeist was being ushered in. This new national mood would alter fundamental aspects of film production. The years prior to the attacks in the 1990s had seen stylized and light hearted blockbusters featuring destruction of national landmarks in *Independence Day* (1996) and the presence of Islamic terrorist villains in *True Lies* (1994). Now these glib discourses could not resurface. *Spiderman* (2002), a comic book adaptation of the iconic Marvel superhero was delayed due to the presence of the World Trade Center in its trailer. Broader films set in New York were also affected with a shot of the World Trade Center in the romantic comedy *Serendipity* being quickly removed. Miramax co-chairman Harvey Weinstein believed "what people are feeling is this: We don't want to be reminded in our entertainment of the disaster we went through."[4] Yet the film industry had also found ways to ideologize and relieve the effect of the attacks. In autumn 2001, a series of militaristic war films were pushed into early release including the Somalia set *Black Hawk Down* and *Behind Enemy Lines*, a film which dealt with the Yugoslav civil war of the 1990s. These films were curiously in synch with the new neo-conservative influence of members of the Bush administration such as Defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld and political advisor Richard Perle. Both films highlighted the foreign policy failures of the previous Clinton administration and thus correlated with the desire for pre-emptive war and a more militarised culture following the 9/11 attacks. *Black Hawk Down* was produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, responsible for numerous

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[3] Malinowki. 2008. Pages 148 -150
[4] Dixon, 2004. Page 37.

blockbusters in the 1990s such as *The Rock* which took notable liberties with its depictions of far right terrorism. During the making of *Black Hawk* Down, he visited Army Vice Chief of Staff General John M. Keane and proclaimed, "General, I'm going to make a movie that you and your army will be proud of." Keane later noted "he did that so we thank him for it."[5] These films were also homogenous with little emphasis on the 'other', set in the imperial mise en scene of Somalia and Bosnia. Jonathan Markovitz believes that this was suitable to the political climate. He noted that the Bush administration's policy had a "perfect correlate in films that cast A-list Hollywood stars in battle against the calculating and murderous violence of always highly racialized terrorist others."[6]

Yet a key film in the summer of 2002 would break with this linear and politically homogenised Hollywood culture. *Minority Report* would prove to be a film in synch with modern America's fears and ambivalences about the War on Terror. The film would be based on a 1956 short story by Philip K Dick about a dystopian America in 2054 in which murder can be predicted by a group of clairvoyants for police purposes, a department entitled 'Pre-Crime'. The conceit of the story is that this ultimately backfires on the police chief John Anderton who is fingered as a future killer. The story elicits natural questions of free will vs determinism for its protagonist as well as ones of civil liberties for its audience. Yet despite the resonance of its premise in post 9/11 America, *Minority Report's* pre-production dated back ten years before its release. After originally being optioned to be directed by Paul Verhoeven in the early 1990s, following the success of *Total Recall*, the

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[5] Corrigan, 2012. Page 45.
[6] In Dixon, 2004. Page 22.

project had fallen by the wayside until 1997.[7] It was then picked up by *Speed* director

Jan De Bont only for his prospects to be blown by the critical and box office failure of

his own sequel, *Speed 2* that year.[8] Nevertheless, a screenplay had been produced

for De Bont by screenwriter Jon Cohen to which both Spielberg and Tom Cruise

committed. The project would be announced as a joint venture between Cruise's

own production company Cruise/Wagner Productions, Jan De Bont's (who would

now be in the role of producer) *Blue Tulip*, *20th Century Fox* and Spielberg's own

Dreamworks and *Amblin Entertainment* in 1998.[9] Scheduling conflicts delayed the

film for a few years which allowed for a script rewrite by screenwriter Scott Frank.

The filming began as late as May 2001.[10]

The post 9/11 release of *Minority Report* was thematically fortuitous. The finished

film, though a far darker science fiction film in an oeuvre including *Close Encounters*

of The Third Kind and *ET*, is one that affirms quintessential Spielberg themes. One

salient element of Spielberg's films is his narrative refrain of absent fatherhood,

particularly captured through the perspective of a child performance. Yet this theme

is unusually inverted in *Minority Report* - the central character of middle-aged cop

John Anderton is shown to be bereft of a child after his son's kidnapping six years

prior. This tragedy leads him to support an extreme 'Pre-Crime' system in which

future murderers are pre-emptively stopped and arrested by police without trial.

Much of the film's early first act scenes see Anderton watch old videos of his son into

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[7] Buckland, 2006 Page 210.
[8] Buckland, 2006. Page 197.
[9] Hindes and Petrikin. 1998. http://variety.com/1998/film/news/d-works-fox-do-spielberg-cruise-report-   1117489352/.Date accessed: February 1st 2013.
[10] Buckland, 2006. Page 197.

the night, dwelling on his tragic loss. Joseph Kowalski noted that Spielberg's focus on

tragic themes of familial breakdown generated a consistent emotional intimacy:

> *There are numerous differences between the Dick novella and the screenplay, but the most noticeable is the script's inclusion of a highly personal story about a broken family. It is this that transforms Minority Report from a typical "big" film to a trademark Spielbergian "big-little" film.[11]*

Kowalski's notion of *Minority Report* as a "big-little film" was also in tune with the

immediate post 9/11 context. The aforementioned early scenes of Anderton grieving

over his son seem to present a parallel with the bereaved families mourning their

devastating losses following the 9/11 attacks. Anderton's son is shown to be

permanently missing rather than murdered, a haunting plot notion that recalls the

'missing' posters around the site of the World Trade Center attacks in New York.

Spielberg's usage of a resonant emotional context also applies to Kowalski's "big

film" elements of *Minority Report*. The film's key premise of the draconian pre-crime

system is shown to derive from a palpable emotional context. Anderton attempts to

rationalize the policies, stating that "the fact that you prevented it from happening

doesn't change the fact it was going to happen." Yet this is countered in a

memorable scene when United States Justice Department member Danny Witwer

(who has been assigned to investigate pre-crime by the US Attorney General and is

later forced to pursue Anderton after he is identified as a future killer) quizzes

Anderton about the ethics of being able to stop pre-emptive murder. Witwer

confides that his father was shot and killed, relating to Anderton's loss. Yet he also

conveys the danger of the 'pre-crime' institution, noting the system has flaws. He

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[11] Kowalski, 2008. Page 10.

warns that it is "human, it always is." Anderton's dedication to the pre-crime system

sits with the natural emotional and political responses to the 9/11 attacks - the

desire for pre-emption and revenge were affirmed by the Bush administration's

quick response to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan who sheltered the 9/11

planners. Yet Witwer reminds Anderton of the dangers of knee-jerk reaction and gut

feeling. By reminding him of the infallible and unforgiving nature of the 'pre-crime'

policy, Witwer warns of the dangers of untrammelled police and governmental

power. This infallibility of policy is in turn contrasted and juxtaposed with the

fallibility of men like Witwer and Anderton, both having suffered immense loss.

This kind of dualism employed by Spielberg is one coterminous with much of the

immediate discourse of the post 9/11 world. This is corrobated by journalistic

responses to the Bush administration following the attacks. Peter Brooks thought

"that our mourning was hijacked by a simplistically militaristic response, a knee-jerk

jingoism that substituted for any reflective policy."[12] A similar phenomenon was

conveyed by Ann Cvetkovich who widely criticised reactions across the spectrum:

"the primary effect of the left critique seems to be righteous indignation and anger,

in its own way a relative of the anger that has been mobilized into militarism."[13]

Spielberg's film peculiarly captures this symbiotic relationship in which the

exhausted anger of Anderton has translated into a kind of sentimental

authoritarianism.

The visuals and mise en scene of *Minority Report* are similarly conflicted. Janusz

Kaminski, Spielberg's cinematographer for *Saving Private Ryan*, imbues the film with

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[12]In Greenberg, 2003. Page 49.
[13] In Greenberg, 2003. Page 61.

jazzy blues and greys, creating a melancholic and moribund veneer. The film's particularly relevant Washington DC setting is overcast with a permanent bleached out, bland sky, symbolizing the emotional numbness of a city in which civil liberties have been overly circumvented. One of the most vivid scenes sees Anderton run through a rain swept DC street at night with a Pre-crime video advertisement projected on an overhead building. A memorable comment from the promotional video is from the US Attorney General who notes, "we want to make sure what keeps us safe also keeps us free." There is an evident contradiction in the Attorney General appearing in the advertisement due to him ordering Witwer to investigate the 'Pre-crime' system. Yet the banal rhetoric highlights the depths to which civil liberties have been eroded. The Attorney General's philosophy is a curious inversion of the second president John Adam's immortal, "Those willing to give up liberty for security deserve neither." Spielberg delineates a society that has precisely done so. This banality is further complemented by Kaminski's bluesy and melancholic cinematography set against the depressed and soaked streets of Washington DC, showing that government pre-emption and power has not alleviated the spirit or well-being of American society. Most tellingly, following the satirical aside of the advertisement, Anderton heads into an abandoned building to meet a drug dealer who patents a narcotic called "Clarity". This metaphor is concomitant with the dizzying aftermath of the attacks; the sudden war in Afghanistan and passing of controversial legislation led many citizens into feeling dislocated. David Simpson, whose book *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* explored the memory of the United States following the attacks, captures this bewilderment:

> *in less than two years we went from the fall of the Twin Towers and the attack on the Pentagon to the invasion of Iraq, a process marked by propagandist compression and manufactured consent so audacious as to seem unbelievable.*[14]

Spielberg's film's narrative and imagery is similarly disorientated. Perhaps the most powerful visual metaphor of *Minority Report* is its image of altered perception. A key plot motif in the second act sees Anderton having to endure a retinal operation in order to have a new pair of eyes to bypass pre-crime security, retrieve a key clairvoyant and discern any alternative to his status as a future killer. The eyeball trade conceit highlights the alteration of perception Anderton must undergo in order to realize and alter his future as well as understand the workings of 'pre-crime'. Anderton has traded eyes with someone called Mr Yakamoto, highlighting the dangers of racial profiling that could become entrenched in the 'pre-crime' system and by extension for audiences, the patriot act and other governmental and military powers. By usage of the eye metaphor, Spielberg underlines the monolithic and homogenizing nature of big governmental power. This is also cleverly conjoined to a depressing capitalism in numerous scenes. In one scene, whilst Anderton is wearing Yakamoto's eyes, interactive and personalized advertisements promote clothing to him in a Gap Clothes store, based on 'his' eyes consumer history. This nascently prefigures Canadian journalist and author Naomi Klein's later concept of *Disaster Capitalism*[15] in 2007. Dan Hassler Frost ulilized her argument to analyse the sub-genre of comic book films that would become more prevalent in the post 9/11 world. Yet her words find strong affinity with the encouraged perspectives of big

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[14] Simpson, 2006.Page 4.
[15] Klein, 2008.

government and big business in *Minority Report* which seem to dominate the citizens of 2054 Washington DC. Klein stated:

> *A more accurate term for a system that erases the boundaries between Big Government and Big Business is not liberal, conservative or capitalist but corporatist. Its main characteristics are huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security….But because of the obvious drawbacks for the majority of the population left outside the bubble, other features of the corporatist state tend to include aggressive surveillance (once again, with government and large corporations trading favors and contracts), mass incarceration, shrinking civil liberties and often, though not always, torture.*[16]

Minority Report strangely anticipates this cycle in a variety of ways. The first act sees Anderton inhabit a comfortable city apartment as well as having a powerful and serious minded profession. With him being predicted as a future killer, this prism abruptly ends and he is forced to associate himself with a discarded underclass. The most revealing scene as to the lives of this underclass sees 'pre-crime' police attempt to find Anderton in an abandoned building with the use of robotic spiders. Spielberg's camera looks down upon citizens such as single mothers and drug addicts who are aggressively retinally scanned and intimidated. Spielberg's film encapsulates the "bubble" that Klein highlights as existing for the wealthy as well as how this economy has coalesced with an almighty police state that prevents social justice.

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[16] In Hassler- Frost, 2011. Page 71.

The political images at the heart of *Minority Report* convey fears that oppose the Bush administration's rhetoric. A brief and striking image, taken from the 'pre-cog''s long memories and records of murder, sees Abraham Lincoln appear digitally on screen, taken from the Gettysburg address. Morris believed that this iconic image constitutes "the first hint about Constitutional repercussions of the pre-crime programme."[17] Yet Lincoln was far from the reminder of the sanctity of civil liberties that Morris evinces. Lincoln was accused of being dictatorial in his suspension of habeas corpus during the civil war - a decision which parallels the pre-emptive and paranoid world of *Minority Report*. *Minority Report's* arguments against civil liberties are shown to be philosophically as well as historically vindicated. In a later scene, Danny Witwer begins a debate with Anderton about the merits of his pre-emptive system. Witwer declares that "we're arresting individuals who've broken no law." This is disputed by another cop who refers to the accuracy of pre-crime as "absolute metaphysics".

Yet the high-minded claims for 'Pre-crime' are later revealed to be false ones. In a series of third act denouements, Anderton discovers that he was set up as a future murderer due to knowledge from an investigation into a previous murder case involving a woman called Anne Lively. He also finds out that one of the 'pre-cog' clairvoyants, Agatha, often disagrees about the murder predictions, creating the distinctive 'minority report' of the title - yet this is ultimately suppressed by the 'Pre-Crime' system for finesse and cohesion. Anderton also finds his alleged future murder victim who then pretends to be Anderton's son's killer. However, Anderton eventually sees through the ruse and realizes his son's kidnapping was re-enacted in

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[17] Morris, 2007.Page 319.

order to make him a fervent believer in the 'Pre-Crime' system. It is revealed that

'Pre-crime' rests on a lie when it is realised that the corruption goes right to the top

in the form of 'Pre-Crime' head and former friend Lamar Burgess; Agatha's mother

was murdered by Burgess in order to maintain her in the 'Pre-Crime' system. The

deception and malfeasance juxtaposed against the targeting of future murderers

presented in *Minority Report* resonate against the backdrop of extraordinary

rendition and the politicization of key groups created under the Patriot Act. The

film's historic imagery of the Civil War and philosophical/theological notions of

"metaphysics" also naturally establish it within an American context of liberty vs

security and secularism vs theocracy - wholly pertinent subjects throughout the Bush

era.

Lance Rubin believes *Minority Report* to be highly prophetic. He thought that the film

presciently anticipated the War on Iraq, launched only eight months after its release

in March 2003:

> *The "Absolute metaphysics" of both Pre-Crime's mission and the NSS policy, however, is dependent upon conclusive, corrobated data forecasting an impending act of aggression. But as the Precog's vision of Anderton's guilt and Ann Lively's murder contained minority reports, the CIA's post-9/11 intelligence on Iraq was far from conclusive. In the same way Burgess suppresses Pre-Crime's ambiguity, the White House manipulated forecasts of the future to meet their own predetermined decisions.*[18]

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[18] Birkenstein, Froula and Randell, 2010. Page 185.

Minority's Report's sobering storyline and fraught narrative gave it a feel distinctly inflected by the rise of neo-conservative influence in the Bush administration.

Image 1: *Minority Report murder scene*

These powerful parallels Rubin notes are circumstantial. Filmed in 2001, there is no discernible way that Spiellberg's film could have foreboded the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet this quality would be derivable for a July 2002 audience almost immediately. The opening sequence is of a prevention of a murder in Georgetown, orchestrated in a manifest and undoubting manner by Anderton and his colleagues. The rush of pre-emption was all too overwhelmingly captured eight months after *Minority Report's* release in the arguments over dubious intelligence for Iraq's chemical weapons. Indeed, only a month before *Minority Report's* release in July 2002, Bush had conveyed the central pre-emptive doctrine to the graduates of US military Academy Class of 2002 in West Point, New York that "we must take the battle to the enemy" and "if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have

waited too long."[19] Yet despite this notable reciprocity between reality and fiction, how do we dismiss charges of fortuitous conjecture being levelled at the ambitious readings of Rubin and others who saw more than broad post 9/11 resonance in *Minority Report*? Spielberg himself was hardly vocal about any political resonance intended in *Minority Report*. In an interview with the BBC in 2002, his tentative opinion was "every science fiction movie I have seen, any one worth their weight in celluloid, warns us about things that ultimately come true."[20] In an interview with *LA Weekly* meanwhile, Spielberg conceded the film's relevance by saying "we're giving up some of our freedom so the government can protect us."[21] *Minority Report's* filming before the critical events of the first George W. Bush administration still make a political analysis problematic despite Spielberg's notion of political relevance. Perhaps this begs the question - as its pre-production context occurred in the late 1990s, would *Minority Report* still have been similarly in synch if it had been released in the Clinton era?

The issue of civil liberties was still a prevalent one in the 1990s. The Oklahoma city bombings in 1995 and the Dar es Salaam and Nairobi AL Qaeda attacks in 1998 both increased domestic wariness and fear of terrorism, even if they didn't match the traumatic and seismic impact of 9/11. The Oklahoma City Bombing (which was a case of far right domestic militancy and not Islamic terrorism) was particularly impacting and brought forward the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. The

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[19] Gilmore. 2002. http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=43798.
Date accessed: 14th February 2013.
[20]Cawthorne,
2002.http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2002/06/28/steven_spielberg_minority_report_interview.sht ml.
Date accessed: 20th January 2013
[21] Powers, 2002.http://www.laweekly.com/2002-06-27/columns/majority-report/2/
  Date accessed: 21st January 2013.

law limited the right of habeas corpus to those convicted of terrorism as well as appeals against the death sentence to those convicted. Clinton also desired tougher legislation for surveillance against suspected criminals. He said this on April 24th, 1996:

> *Nevertheless, as strong as this bill is, it should have been stronger. For example, I asked the Congress to give U.S. law enforcement increased wiretap authority in terrorism cases, including the power to seek multi-point wiretaps, enabling police to follow a suspected terrorist from phone to phone, and authority for the kind of emergency wiretaps available in organized crime cases. But the Congress refused.[22]*

These practices would be inexorably accelerated in the Bush administration but the rhetoric of the Clinton presidency shows this was far from a benign period. Samuel Walker provides other testing demographic examples in that "the national prison population soared 55 per cent during the Clinton years, from 850, 000 in 1992 to 1, 318, 333 eight years later."[23] *Minority Report's* vision of 'buoyant consumer capitalism meets police repression' would hardly feel ill-fitting if it were released in the late 1990s. Yet the film's critical reception gave it a thrust that was uniquely Bush orientated. Variety critic Todd McCarthy viewed the film as Spielberg's "darkest and socially relevant, as it outfits a straight man on the run film noir yarn with extraordinary technological postulations as well as a genuinely thoughtful investigation of the suddenly pertinent subject of thwarting crime before it happens."[24] Richard Corliss of *Time* compared the film to US domestic and foreign

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[22] Wooley. 1996. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=52713 Date accessed: 17th January 2013.
[23] Walker, 2012. Page 425.
[24] McCarthy,2002. http://variety.com/2002/film/reviews/minority-report-2-1200549076/ Date accessed: 20th January 2013.

policy and believed that "instead of an Arab American, the suspect here is Tom Cruise, who happens to be the town's top-mind cop."[25] *Minority Report* had been viewed as one of the first films to be a socially relevant and palpable discourse on the Bush-Cheney doctrine, despite its obvious affinities with the Clinton administration.

Nonetheless, the film had struck a far larger chord than had other films released in the summer of 2002 in capturing the zeitgeist of post 9/11 America. *The Sum of All Fears* and *Windtalkers* both capitalized on the climate of fear engulfing America in a not dissimilar way to the releases of *Black Hawk Down* and *Behind Enemy Lines* in autumn 2001. The former film was a reboot of the 1990s Jack Ryan Cold War thrillers which features a nuclear terrorist attack which destroys Baltimore. At the October 2001 preview of the film, an executive exclaimed "god, this is so positive and life affirming, we could release it today!"[26] Yet the critical reaction upon the film's release in the US on 31st May 2002 was generally negative. Peter Rainier of *New York Magazine* thought that the movie "has been upstaged by the sum of our fears" and solemnly noted that "right now, Hollywood doesn't know how to deal with the terrorist threat."[27] The latter film *Windtalkers*, a World War Two drama involving the story of the Najavo windtalkers who helped to create unbreakable codes in the Pacific campaign, was a continuation of the spate of war-orientated action films released in the wake of 9/11, following on from the tradition of *Beyond Enemy Lines* and *Black Hawk Down*. Yet the film ultimately flopped when its hundred million

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[25]Corliss.2002.http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2003162_2003166_2004719,00.html Date accessed: 16th January 2013.

[26] Dixon, 2001. Page144.

[27] Rainier, 2002. http://nymag.com/nymetro/movies/reviews/6082/ Date accessed: 27th January 2013.

dollar budget was proffered no recompense with a return of $40 million.[28] The critics too had tired of the nationalistic war formula that John Woo had pioneered. Roger Ebert disliked the film's jingoism, noting that "the moment you decide to make "Windtalkers" a big budget action movie with a major star and lots of explosions, flying bodies and flying stuntmen, you give up any possibility that it can succeed on a human scale."[29]

In contrast, *Minority Report* successfully channelled post 9/11 themes into allegorical and figurative territory unlike this collection of very literal films. An enduring legacy of *Minority Report* was the increase in Philip K Dick adaptations that followed its release - John Woo would turn his efforts to adapting *Paycheck* in 2003, a film dealing with a dystopian world of memory loss and corporate corruption while Richard Linklater would adapt *A Scanner Darkly* in 2006, a pertinent film about drug surveillance. Thematically, we shall see that *Minority Report's* themes will find sustenance not just in Spielberg's works but also in an influx of comic book movies with themes of loss, pre-emption and unilateralism. Yet perhaps *Minority Report's* most enduring legacy in responding to the zeitgeist is its breaking with the militaristic cycle of post 9/11 releases. Although this has admittedly been proved circumstantial due to the film's fortuitous timing and release, the film segued into a political climate of fear and disorientation. The following chapters will affirm this sense of changed narrative and thematic orientation.

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[28] Dixon, 2001. Page 144.
[29] Ebert, 2002. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/windtalkers-2002.
   Date accessed: 26th January 2013.

Chapter 2: *Batman Begins* and the Subversive Superhero Film

My second case study of Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) represents a more strident reflection of the impact of 9/11 on the American psyche and a further development of patenting post 9/11 themes for mainstream audiences. Nolan's narrative extends the pre-emptive and totalitarian themes of *Minority Report* through the complex unilateralism of the Batman legend. I consider the work of writers Douglas Kellner, Dan Hassler Frost and Justine Toh as part of my analysis of the film's post 9/11 narrative which references numerous elements of neo-conservative foreign policy. I have also sought a comparison of Nolan's vision to that of Tim Burton's and Joel Schumacher's rendition of the titular character in the 1990s to highlight the pervasive ideological influences of Nolan's film. The superhero of Nolan's film is one that represents a conscious supplanting of the once escapist sub-genre by politicized post 9/11 influences.

The fashions in which Batman had been depicted cinematically before Nolan's vision had offered differed tonal, thematic and narrative takes on the character. The most well-remembered film precedent was Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), a dark and highly stylised take on the character. The film's mise en scene was overwhelmingly baroque and close to the vision of the original 1940s comic books; a score by Danny Elfman was also suitably gothic, imbuing the film with a downcast and lugubrious mood. Yet despite being dark, Burton's vision was resolutely uncomplicated, hermetically sealed within Gotham and unconcerned with contextual matters. The film's plot mainly structures itself around Manichean duels between the Joker and Batman on the streets of the infamous Gotham city, eventually evolving into a revenge formula

familiar of Hamlet when Batman finds out the Joker killed his pares. The film's marketing was also effectively simplistic with an iconic Bat signal poster immediately symbolizing the film's pop cultural significance. Edwin Page, who wrote on the film career of Tim Burton, commented, "*Batman* was as much about marketing and hype as it was about the film, and the fact that central characters were already well established before Burton became involved."[30]

This simplicity did not serve Burton well critically, despite the film grossing $251 million from its then large scale $35 million budget[31]. An unimpressed Roger Ebert perceived the film as "a triumph of design over story, style over substance - a great-looking movie with a plot you can't care much about."[32] *Time Out* compared the film to David Lynch's *Dune* and called it "plotless, unfocused, barely held together by mind blowing sets, gadgets and costumes, and by director Burton's visual flair."[33] This hollowness of content can be contrasted with the political context of Frank Miller's comic book *The Dark Knight Returns*[34] (1986), which explicitly paralleled Batman's actions with Reagan's hardline anti-Communist policies. Burton had made a perverse and distinctly apolitical film despite the promising thematic darkness and gothic visuals. This would continue with the film's darker and more perverse sequel *Batman Returns* in 1992 whose villains of The Penguin and Catwoman were even more outlandish. The critical reception was less than strong - Derek Malcolm thought the film "resembles nothing so much as a blacker, spikier but less focused version of

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[30] Page, 2006. Page 74.
[31] IMDB. 1999. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096895/business
Date accessed: 17th April 2013.
[32] Ebert, 1989. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/batman-1989
 Date accessed: 16th April 2013.
[33] Wim, 1989. http://www.timeout.com/london/film/batman-1989
  Date accessed: 15th April 2013.
[34] Miller, 1986.

a Disney film made flesh"[35] whilst Philip Thomas of *Empire* magazine found the film having a "remarkable lack of any humour, as if Burton and screenwriter Daniel Waters are taking the whole thing too seriously."[36] The subsequent *Batman* films throughout the mid to late 1990s would take a significantly different path - whilst retaining some of the outlandish nature of Burton's films, they would be light-hearted and more exuberant under the direction of Joel Schumacher. This would eventually derail the franchise.

The series' new direction in *Batman Forever* (1995) was camp and cartoonish with the enemies of Two Face and The Riddler being comic foibles rather than genuine villains. The 1940s décor was replaced with a glitziness and blaring colour. A drastic change had been made with Val Kilmer replacing Michael Keaton in the role of Batman. Schumacher's style culminated in disaster with the less successful *Batman and Robin* in 1997. An even camper exercise than its predecessor, with another Batman replacement in the form of George Clooney, the film was lambasted by critics and a failure at the box office with a 63% decline in sales on its second weekend of release in the US.[37] Empire reviewer Neil Jeffries called the film a "camp end to a dreadful era for Schumacher at the helm of the Batman franchise."[38] Ebert was pained by Burton's films' hollowness and found *Batman and Robin* truly vapid. He advised the filmmakers to "scale down" and "give the foreground to the

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[35]Malcolm, 1992.
http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian_review/0,,558610,00.html
   Date accessed: 20th April 2013.
[36] Thomas,1992.http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?DVDID=116102
    Date accessed: 20th April 2013.
[37] Variety Staff Update, 1997. http://variety.com/1997/film/news/bat-beats-up-b-o-1116677093/
    Date accessed: 16th April 2013.
[38]Jeffries. 1997. http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=131928
   Date accessed: 17th April 2013.

characters and not the special effects."[39] Yet Ebert's desire for a more grounded and resonant treatise on the character would not be heeded for some time. Schumacher's credibility was sunk, the film was a box office failure and George Clooney disavowed the franchise. There would be a long interregnum before Batman would return to the screen.

The years between 1998 and 2005 would see a surge in Marvel comic book adaptations distinctly different from the earlier *Batman* films and would lay the ground for a more realistic take on the character. *X-Men* (2000) and *Spiderman* (2002) seemed to deal with more serious themes and politicized imagery, far from the light-heartedness of Schumacher's output or the perverse nature of Burton's Batman. *X-Men's* storyline of excluded mutant superheroes, divided between those seeking acceptance and separatism had clear parallels with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. *Spiderman*, though not an overtly political film like *X*-Men, happened to be released less than a year after the September 11th attacks, in June 2002. With its New York setting and brooding, adolescent central character who turns vigilante after losing his uncle traumatically, the comic book film seemed to be complementing much American angst. Yet the best example of a politically relevant release would be the sequel, *X Men 2*. Its timely release in spring 2003 coincided with the Iraq War and the film's plot seemed familiar enough for critics to view it as a liberal discourse on the War on Terror. Kenneth Toran believed that the film's conflict between separatist mutants and peace seeking ones correlated with George Bush's disagreements with international law: "Xavier, rather like the U.N.'s Kofi

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[39] Ebert, 1997. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/batman-and-robin-1997
Date accessed: 17th April 2013.

Annan, thinks everyone should get along as equals, while Magneto, borrowing a page from some in Washington, thinks because mutants are stronger and smarter than anyone else it makes perfect sense that they rule the world."[40] *X-Men 2* proved that mainstream fare could incorporate socially relevant themes and convey them tangibly to critics. With the film's box office success at over $200 million, it was clear that this recent kind of superhero film could yield success. Earlier in January 2003, *Memento* director Christopher Nolan had been offered the chance to direct a revival of the *Batman* franchise. He promised of his vision that "ours will be a recognizable, contemporary reality against which an extraordinary hero will rise."[41] For the subsequent two years, Nolan would cultivate a comic book hero for post 9/11 America whilst regenerating a franchise that had been consigned to the wilderness.

One of the remarkable elements of the making of *Batman Begins* was the grounded approach to the material. Nolan visualized the film's style as a "contemporary thriller" and claimed to derive much of the film's plot from Frank Miller's tenebrous 1987 Batman origin story, entitled *Batman: Year One*.[42] Yet perhaps more revealing was not the source material or style of the film's making but rather the fact that Nolan always intended to segue key themes from his narratively confounding earlier films of *Memento* (2000) and *Insomnia* (2002) into *Batman Begins*. These earlier films were morally problematic thrillers, not unlike the dystopian narrative employed in *Minority Report*. The former was a film noir involving an otherwise conventional

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[40] Turan. 2003. http://articles.latimes.com/2003/may/02/entertainment/et-turan2
   Date accessed: 20th April 2013.
[41] Graser and Dunkley. 2004. http://variety.com/2004/biz/news/the-bat-and-the-beautiful-1117899714/
    Date accessed: 21st April 2013.
[42] Mottram, 2005. Page xii.

revenge plot hampered by memory loss and consequent loss of identity whilst the latter was an unorthodox police thriller concerned with obsession and malpractice in a horrific Alaskan murder case. In an interview with film journalist James Mottram, Nolan cites these influences as conscious ones. Nolan thought the themes of the film entailed "things we looked at in *Insomnia*, in terms of ends justifying means and the conflict between pragmatism and idealism."[43] Nolan also notes the precedence of his other work on the main character of the dark knight himself. Mottram postulates that both "Bruce Wayne and Leonard from *Memento*, are haunted by their pasts"; Nolan affirms "this hollow, burned-out quality very present in both characters."[44] This very burned-out quality was evinced in John Anderton - it was clear that Nolan would be renewing a similar feeling of disorientation that had felt palpably resonant in the wounded America of 2002.

Casting as well as characterization was strongly in synch with a post 9/11 context. The casting of Christian Bale as Bruce Wayne was especially intriguing. As the isolated Wall Street stockbroker serial killer Patrick Bateman in the yuppie satire *American Psycho* (2000), the actor had captured a sense of American crisis and malaise. Nolan commented in the Mottram interview that "the similarity is very interesting to me. What's darkest about Bruce Wayne is not that he's utterly enraged. Or at least it's not just that. He is driven by rage; very primal and negative impulses."[45] The two characters of Patrick Bateman and Bruce Wayne share negative characteristics of the post 9/11 psyche – knee-jerk reaction and an insatiable thirst for vengeance. Bateman's empty existence leads him to murder to alleviate his

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[43] Mottram, 2005. Page xix.
[44] Mottram, 2005. Page xix.
[45] Mottram, 2005 page xvii

hollow Wall Street regime - the fact that Nolan implies a similar characteristic to Bruce Wayne's drive to rid crime and villainy suggested the film as continuing a subversion of the Bush War on Terror doctrine as well as American national identity itself.

This kind of politics is elucidated in David S. Goyer's script for the film. Also interviewed by Mottram, Goyer notes the sense of disorientation and distortion integral to *Batman Begins*: "There's Batman, which is one personality. Then there's the public Bruce Wayne, which is as much a secret identity as Batman is - this billionaire playboy person is really a front to distract people from Batman. Then there's the private Bruce Wayne who, in a sense, is the darkest Bruce Wayne of all."[46] The sclerotic nature of the character and Bruce Wayne's position as a wealthy billionaire can be seen as ideologically loaded. Wayne's hollow nature and grieving for his murdered parents seem apt for the wounded emotions of a damaged American capitalism after the traumatic events of 9/11. The image of the private billionaire Bruce Wayne in crisis seems to affirm the anti-capitalistic nature of the World Trade Center attack and the symbolism of commerce that it destroyed. Another noticeable parallel Wayne possesses is with the presidency of George W. Bush - both are men of immense inherited wealth knocked traumatically sideways by horrific events. In Wayne's case, the childhood murder of his parents sent him on a trajectory towards embodying the Batman persona - in Bush's, the far larger scale events of the 9/11 attacks. Yet the finished film of *Batman Begins* is actually far more complex than a mere psychological allegory of the Bush presidency and Nolan

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[46] Mottram, 2005, page xxxi.

proceeds to complicate and transfigure American discourse around the impact of the 9/11 attacks.

The political nuances of *Batman Begins* are revealed early in the film's first act in which Bruce Wayne begins his physical and psychological training that will eventually form part of his embodiment of the Batman persona. This section sees Bruce Wayne escape from a Bhutanese prison (the reason he has been imprisoned is initially kept secret from the audience) and be initiated into an underground organisation called the League of Shadows. The League of Shadows takes a draconian position on the tolerance of crime and also on Western liberalism which consequently make the film's act depart from an image of Batman as an American icon. The philosophy of Wayne's tutor Ducard and the organisation's leader Ra's Al Ghul could be seen as somewhat akin to the beliefs of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in that they seek to repudiate the alleged decadence of Western civilisation. Ducard himself fatalistically states "the League of Shadows has been a check against human corruption for years. We sacked Rome, loaded ships with plague rats, burned London to the ground. Everytime a civilisation reaches the pinnacle of its decadence, we return to store the balance." Such language is strikingly close to the beliefs and political aims of Osama Bin Laden. In the 9/11 commission report, Bin Laden espoused a desire "to end the immorality of and godlessness of its society and culture"[47] in reference to American society. The close relationship between Batman and an anti-Western movement is a highly charged opening and subverts conventional expectations of the myth of an all-American superhero.

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[47] *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004, pgs 76- 77.

The fundamentalist League of Shadows offer tutelage to the Western Wayne in Nolan's complex first act.

Image 2: *Batman Begins* League of Shadows training scene

Nonetheless, Nolan cleverly tempers this by showing The League of Shadows not as Arab extremists but oriental fatalists. Its leader Ra's Al Ghul is a Fu Manchu style sword wielding villain whose followers train as ninjas rather than Islamic extremists. Dan Hassler-Frost, author of *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the NeoLiberal Age,* saw these stereotypes as thinly veiled and also multi-faceted. Hassler cites "an ideological conflict similar to Huntington's clash of civilisations: the League of Shadows corresponds directly with the terrorist cell structure associated with Al Qaeda and its extremist agenda" and calls Ra's Al Ghul "the archetypal orientalist enemy of Western values."[48] Douglas Kellner viewed the incarnation of the terrorist Ra's Al Ghul as Chinese more literally, claiming him as an embodiment of new world power, "as a figure of the threat of China as a potential strategic enemy."[49]

The Batman lexicon has denigrated 'Yellow Peril' vividly, most noticeably in a December 1941 comic book which alluded to the Asian destruction of Pearl Harbour

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[48] Frost, 2011. Page 94.
[49] Kellner, 2010. Page 10.

in conflicts between bi-planes and submarines.[50] Yet Nolan's film is hardly in the same vein of Western propaganda that Kellner and Hassler-Frost suggest. The League of Shadows become complicit with the American Wayne's goals and are far from racially homogenous in that they are revealed to have a similar global structure to Al Qaeda. Wayne's mentor Ducard is a European whose wife's murder led him into the embrace of the League of Shadows, alluding to fears of Western defectors to Islam. His induction of Wayne carries similar notions of fanatical devotion and oneness. Ducard espouses "if you make yourself more than just a man… if you devote yourself to an ideal… if they can't stop you… then you become something else entirely." Wayne's induction into Ducard's fanaticism embarrassingly recalls earlier US administration relations with Islamist groups. Under the Reagan administration, a largess of funding and weapons were given to Islamist groups in Afghanistan to fight a Soviet backed regime. In 1986, Cato Institute foreign policy advisor Ted Galen Carpenter viewed the aid recipients as problematic. He commented that, "a rebel victory in all probability will not bring about a capitalist economic system or a political system based on respect for individual rights" and stressed "there should be considerable reluctance to back the mujaheddin with U.S. influence and tax dollars when there is a significant risk of creating an Iranian-style dictatorship in Afghanistan."[51] Nolan's subversive first act conveys these errors of US policy which led to the 9/11 attacks. Wayne is tasked with taking a blue poppy to Ducard, an image which references the Opium plagued fields of Afghanistan that would become a problem following the US invasion. The US too is shown to play a

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[50] Kane , 1992.
[51] Carpenter, 1986. http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa074es.html
Date accessed: 17th May 2013.

surreptitious and exploitative influence in the region of the League of Shadows – an electronics van from Wayne's corporation of Wayne Enterprises is shown to operate in an impoverished Bhutanese slum, much to the detriment of the locals. Far from strident Western propaganda, the America of *Batman Begins* is acutely vulnerable, as well as fatally naïve.

A similar anxiety presides over America's response to the emotions of trauma and loss. Like John Anderton, Wayne is shown to be consistently in mourning, this time for the loss of his parents as a child. He too grows to believe in the necessity of legal circumvention and curtailment of civil liberties. In a flashback to the prison release of his parents' killer Joe Chill, a 21 year old Wayne contemplates killing him only for Chill to be shot for testifying against a Gotham mob boss. Wayne's friend since childhood, Rachel Dawes, lectures Wayne on his desire for retribution, telling him "you're not talking about justice, you're talking about revenge." Wayne attempts to reconcile these dichotomies throughout *Batman Begins*, often through sheer rationalization. He justifies his vigilante position as 'pre-crime' attempt to rationalize their attacks on pre-meditated murder. Wayne stresses to his butler Alfred that "people need dramatic examples to shake themselves out of apathy" and breaks with the League of Shadows by stipulating "I'm no executioner." Yet despite this attitude of winning hearts and minds, Batman's philosophy and actions still incorporate undemocratic means and violence in order to achieve his goals of eradicating crime and corruption in Gotham. On his return to Gotham, Wayne uses surveillance to listen in on key conversations, bugging the office of Gotham mobster Carmine Falcone to stop a major Gotham drug deal. His terrifying methods of

interrogation as Batman include using a grappling hook to hang a corrupt cop from a Gotham apartment block.

These actions are paralleled against post 9/11 emotions and threats. Fear is the signature theme throughout *Batman Begins* - a bold opening flashback incepts this by showing Wayne's first frightening childhood encounter with bats. Yet Nolan systematically broadens this fear to fit a more pervasive post 9/11 hysteria when the film shifts to Gotham City in the second act. The second act villain of prison psychologist Jonathan Crane (more openly called "The Scarecrow" in the original comics) utilises chemicals procured from the mob on convicts attempting insanity pleas so they can be drugged into working for him on a secret project in Arkham asylum. The imagery of the usage of chemical weapons on prisoners recalls the messaging of anthrax to Democratic senators in the weeks following 9/11 which created overwhelming incentive towards the creation of the Patriot Act. The secrecy surrounding Crane's activities and his development of biological weapons also recall the tense run up to the Iraq War. These pertinent post 9/11 plot motifs strongly mirror the extraordinarily fast pace of events of the first Bush administration with biological weapons and the state of Iraq rapidly becoming threats. Nolan's film affirms the troubled zeitgeist by showing Batman's vigilantism and unilateralism as renewed and constituted by these resonant dangers.

This understandably establishes *Batman Begins* as a discourse from the perspective of the Bush administration. Its central character is unrelenting in his pursuit of victory and his enemies bear the hallmark of Saddam Hussein's and Osama Bin Laden's malevolence. Yet this perspective is still one that is rendered problematic

and contradicted by Nolan. In Nolan's realistic universe, Batman's suit and devices are derived from Wayne Enterprises's Applied Sciences division, a department which houses specially designed hardware for the US military. Wayne's early training towards embodying the Batman persona sees him use a sleek yet militarised batmobile. In David S. Goyer's original script, the car is described as "a cross between a Lamborghni Countach and a Humvee."[52] Wayne's debt to the military industrial complex is consistently imperilled and fraught with danger in *Batman Begins*. A key development late in the second act sees the theft at sea (revealed later on to be the work of the League of Shadows) of a Wayne Enterprises Microwave Emitter which has the power to vaporize a city's water supply with toxins. This second act plot motif references the biological weaponry being allegedly developed by Saddam Hussein. Justine Toh noted Nolan's film's debt to Bush administration vernacular: "if the Batmobile and Batsuit function as emblems of the military industrial complex, the microwave emitter, in its constitution as a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) invites the film to be read against its socio-political context: the Bush administration's WOT."[53] Yet she also attests to the film's stressing of the internalised complicity that the US possesses with its ostensibly foreign foes: "But really, Batman must save Gotham from a technology created by his own company, and one now exploited by Gotham's enemies."[54] Toh's view affirms *Batman Begins* as a film revolving around the issues of 'blowback'. Just as the Western weaponry utilized against the Soviets by the Mujahedeen wound up in the hands of Islamic

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[52] In Mottram, 2005. Page 63.
[53] Birkenstein, Froula and Randall. 2010, page 132.
[54] Birkenstein, Froula and Randall. 2010, page 132.

fundamentalists bent on US destruction, Wayne's influence and military industrial complex is similarly vulnerable to subversion.

This climaxes in a final showdown between Batman and the League of Shadows who have returned to Gotham to utilize Crane's chemicals with the microwave emitter to create an apocalyptic situation in Gotham. In a dramatic final fight Batman battles Ducard (who in a supernatural twist is really Ra's Al Ghul) on a train designed to destroy Wayne tower. In opposition to Toh, Joseph Feblowitz viewed this final sequence as a redemptive fantasy sequence that alleviates and offers closure to the War on Terror narrative created by Nolan:

> *In the ultimate redemptive fantasy, Ra's al Ghul and Batman fight for the fate of Gotham in a dramatic final scene eerily reminiscent of September 11th. A raised monorail races across the city skyline towards Gotham's tallest skyscraper; Ra's al Ghul and Batman struggle for the controls of the vehicle. In the end, Batman predictably triumphs and the train plunges to the earth in a ball of fire; Gotham is spared both the destruction of the skyscraper and the terrifying repercussions that destruction would bring. Batman refuses the opportunity to kill Ra's al Ghul, allowing him instead to perish in the crash. Batman, throughout the film, refuses to let go of his compassion and to actively kill even in the name of justice (though he also fails to save Ra's, a subtle but vitally important distinction to be explored later). Thus, Batman's moral superiority is proven, the terrorist is defeated and Gotham is spared the reign of fear and chaos.[55]*

Yet despite this brief relief, terrorism is all but defeated in *Batman Begins* and little closure can be proffered. New threats are transmuted by the film's ending. Commissioner Gordon alerts Batman of the likelihood of escalation. He states "we start carrying semi-automatics, they buy automatics, we start wearing Kevlar, and

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[55] Feblowitz, 2009. http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/104/11/the-hero-we-create-911-the-reinvention-of-batman Date accessed: 13th April 2013.

they buy armour piercing rounds." This fear is analogous of many Western liberals' fears of violent reaction by Islamists in response to the policies of the Bush administration. Far from a strident view of the War on Terror conflict, *Batman Begins* is both pragmatic and pessimistic. Any redemption that Feblowitz suggests is eroded by the film's conclusion and the West is ever vulnerable to new and changing threats which threaten any stability. The prospect of 'endless war' which has continued unabated today in the continued War on Terror under the Obama administration is one confirmed by Nolan's uncertain ending.

Batman Begins opened to strong reviews. Roger Ebert felt that the film "works dramatically in addition to being an entertainment"[56] while *Time Out* called the film "a gripping drama about guilt, loss and redemption."[57] Yet only a minority of critics attributed any post 9/11 resonance or meaning to the film. Kim Newman of *Empire* magazine noted the symbolism of the League of Shadows, "a fanatical force run by the bastard sons of Fu Manchu and Osama Bin Laden"[58] while *Sight and Sound* writer Edward Lawrenson found it "cheering to find an event movie subtly handle such issues so soon after the Manichean idiocies of *Revenge of the Sith*."[59] Yet unlike its sequel, *Batman Begins* hadn't generated the same high level of discussion over its presentation of the zeitgeist. The film could also be said to lack the seismic impact its successor had at the box office. Despite more than breaking even worldwide,

[56] Ebert. 2005. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/batman-begins-2005
Date accessed: 22nd April 2013.
[57] DW, 2005. http://www.timeout.com/london/film/batman-begins
Date accessed: 23rd April 2013.
[58] Newman, 2005. http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=9770
Date accessed; 24th April 2013.
[59] Lawrenson, 2005. http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/2401
Date accessed: 25th April 2013.

Batman Begins grossed $205 million out of its $150 million budget in the USA.[60] It was far from the highest grossing film of the summer of 2005 and lacked the seismic phenomenon of its successor.

 Academics, with an element of cynicism, largely saw the film as continuing a right wing discourse for Hollywood blockbusters. Natalie Dupont viewed *Batman Begins* rather ideologically in stating that "*Spiderman* or *Batman* have quickly re-appeared in cinemas, because post 9/11 America is also a post-Reagan one that twice elected George W. Bush to the American presidency."[61] Hassler-Frost thought the film served to "support the mythical narratives of neo liberal capitalism."[62] However, the film's murky politics suggest it as far from a Reaganite renewal in cinema or a paean to the benevolence of neo-liberalism in that its politics suggest acute American fallibility*.* The billionaire Wayne's position at the end of the film is a dismal one. Wayne's house is revealed to have been fully burned down by the League of Shadows and he is rebuffed by Rachel Dawes due to his dual life as Batman. If this is an allegory for the neo-conservative dominated War on Terror then it proves the effects of its doctrines to be depressing ones. Like the 2054 Washington DC of *Minority Report,* obsession with pre-emption and security come at the cost of the individual life and prosperity.

In conclusion, *Batman Begins* developed the mainstream response to 9/11 by renewing *Minority Report's* dystopian vision in regard to American political and

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[60] IMDB. 2005. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0372784/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus
   Date accessed: 19th April 2013.
[61] Dupont 2012. http://transatlantica.revues.org/5419
   Date accessed: 13th December 2012.
[62] Hassler-Frost, 2011. Page 99.

economic life. Released only two years after the beginning of the Iraq War, Nolan's film effectively allegorized the tumult of those years in its multi-layered and complex narrative. The film supplanted the benign and conservative storytelling of the Schumacher *Batman* films which had destroyed the franchise. The post 9/11 superhero film would return in the form of the Bush/Blair allegory of *V for Vendetta* (2005) and the Afghanistan set *Iron Man* (2008). With *Batman Begins*, the superhero film became an appropriate template for the seriousness of post 9/11 fear and anxiety.

Chapter 3: *War of the Worlds* and the forces of post 9/11 reaction

Also released in the summer of 2005, *War of the Worlds*, my third case study, represented a significant development in mainstream film's depiction of post 9/11 America. Spielberg's spectacle driven film contemporizes HG Wells's 1898 novel and accelerates *Minority Report* and *Batman Begins's* East Coast dystopian setting and brooding, masculine themes. The film also represents a bolder representation of the American collective consciousness following the attacks - Spielberg's film incorporates a multitude of visual imagery associated with the day of September 11[th,] as well as subtle references to the Bush administration foreign policy. On a smaller scale, the film evokes the domestic problems of the post 9/11 world including the heightened security surrounding travel and xenophobic paranoia. Like *Batman Begins*, War *of the Worlds* subverts the tone and themes of previous adaptations of the source material for the War on Terror age. The Cold War era allegory of religious solidarity against communist tyranny presented in Byron Haskin's *The War of the Worlds* (1953) is one displaced by Spielberg for a secular perspective against jihadist style alien attackers.

War of the Worlds was predated by a series of films made after *Minority Report* by Spielberg which reflected the banality of the post 9/11 mood. These included *Catch Me if You Can* in 2002, with its plot of real life 1960s conman Frank Abagnale Jr (Leonardo Di Caprio) forging a career as an airline pilot which seemed to pine for a bygone era in which the pilot was revered and led a benign existence. Corrigan describes the film as representing a "period when air travel was itself a pleasurable

adventure and when the pilot's profession was glamorous and highly paid."[63] Nostalgic in its politics, the film seems to yearn for a time prior to the creation of Homeland Security that year, when air travel was admirable and escapist. A similar veneer coursed through Spielberg's subsequent film in 2004, *The Terminal*. This film conveyed the banality of post 9/11 security through its premise of visiting Eastern European Victor Navorski trapped in John F Kennedy airport due to a sudden civil war in his homeland. Whilst ostensibly a comedy deriving humour from the Tom Hanks played Navorksi's travails in the airport, the film percolated pertinent elements of the depressing and oppressive regime of post 9/11 existence. Indeed, film historian Lester Friedman writes that Spielberg "comments on repressive governmental actions, in this case the restrictive practices and persuasive xenophobia sanctioned under the Department of Homeland Security and ostensibly meant to protect American citizens."[64] Despite the acrimony of these themes, the film was received tepidly by critics. David Edelstein of *Slate* called it "icky and fake"[65], whilst A.O Scott of *The New York Times* commented that the film had too much "easy sentiment and artificial sweetness."[66] Yet Spielberg had set something of a thematic precedent with this output in that *War of the Worlds* would in many ways extrapolate the post 9/11 world of a film like *The Terminal* to a far darker conclusion.

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[63] Corrigan, 2012. Page 72.
[64] Friedman. 2006. Page 288.
[65] Edelstein, 2004.http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2004/06/terminal_velocity.html
   Date accessed : 17th June 2013.

[66] A.O Scott, 2004. http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/289945/The-Terminal/overview
   Date accessed : 17th June 2013.

The origin of Spielberg's concept for a modern *War of the Worlds* was largely collaborative. The project gained traction over the course of 2004 and would be a joint venture between Tom Cruise's Cruise/Wagner productions (who had asked for distribution at Paramount) and Spielberg's own Dreamworks. Much akin to *Minority Report*, Josh Friedman's script required a second draft by *Jurassic Park* writer David Koepp.[67] The draft by Koepp was eventually approved by Spielberg and he championed the more dexterous usage of elements of Wells's novel which had been less evident in the 1953 Byron Haskin film adaptation, which took more liberties in its deviations from the novel. Yet Spielberg also praised the script's modernising approach to the source material: "We have the tripods. We had the red weed growing all over. But I never thought of doing it as a period piece at the turn of the century. It just wasn't an interesting way to go. I just can't stand the styles of that time."[68] Tom Cruise adopted a similar veneer towards the project, eliding the perceived anachronistic elements of the original novel and embracing a modern, contemporary vision, commenting that "*War of the Worlds* was always a book that I really enjoyed and I knew that the story could be relevant."[69] A modernizing approach would also be prevalent in a short shooting schedule, spanning a mere 72 days and one which would only give Industrial Light and Magic seven months to complete special effects.[70] Spielberg relied on trusted collaborators, including Janusz Kaminski as cinematographer, which automatically invited comparison with the greyed out war zones of *Saving Private Ryan* as well as the dystopia of *Minority*

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[67] Fleming and Mcnary, 2004. http://variety.com/2004/film/news/war-meets-its-maker-1117901831/
Date accessed: 17th June 2013.
[68] Flynn, 2005. Page 119.
[69] Flynn, 2005. Page 119.
[70] Rose, 2005. http://www.frankrose.com/war-of-the-worlds.html
Date accessed: 18th June 2013.

Report. It was clear that *War of the Worlds* would bare more comparison to these later serious Spielberg films than the escapist wonder of *ET* (1982) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

The publicity for the film in the weeks approaching its release foregrounded associative themes with the War on Terror. Spielberg was more direct about his film's contemporary allusions than he had been for *Minority Report*. In an interview in *USA Today*, he commented, "We live under a veil of fear that we didn't live under before 9/11. There has been a conscious emotional shift in this country."[71] This veil of fear is elicited immediately in a stark opening to Spielberg's film which subverts and acts in opposition to the opening images of Byron Haskin's adaptation. A scene by scene comparison reveals the changes in political culture and national identity from the Cold War setting of Haskin's production to the post 9/11 mood of the 2005 *War of the Worlds*.

The Byron Haskin directed 1953 film opens in a bask of colour and West Coast sunshine with a panoramic shot of a Southern Californian small town, contravening Wells's original dank Victorian England setting. In subsequent shots, two policemen play cards whilst cars halt by a nearby church and moviegoers exiting the cinema view the alien arrival in stunned shock. There is a salient American conservatism to this scene. The images of the church and cinemagoers signal the preserves of American capitalism denied by the Soviet Union by highlighting the importance of religion and the consumer society. Director Byron Haskin defended the rapid switch from England to the US West Coast and implied the resonance of the film's release in

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[71]Spielberg in Breznican, 2005. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2005-06-23-spielberg_x.htm Date accessed: 14th June 2013.

the wake of the fears of the Cold War: "It was identifiable to Americans and that was who we were making the picture for. In making our choice we did as Orson Welles had done. We transposed it to a modern setting, hoping to generate some of the excitement that Welles had had with his broadcast." Pal further explains, "*War of the Worlds* had become especially timely. And that was one of the reasons we updated the story."[72] Confirming the film's middle American setting, John Flynn wrote that "at a time when the world was poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation and one man's crusade to end the Communist infiltration of American culture spread fear, panic and paranoia, the motion picture tapped right into the pulse of middle America with its realistic depiction of interplanetary war."[73]

In contrast, the contemporary setting of *War of the Worlds* is distinctly un-middle American and complemented by a disposition of Spielberg that is far more inauspicious. Our introduction to the USA depicted in the 2005 version shows a wide landscape shot of a Manhattan where the Twin Towers once stood, taken from across the Hudson River on the New Jersey docks, filtered again through Janusz Kaminski's sombre and bleached cinematography. Though not a futuristic dystopia in the style of *Minority Report*, the imagery carries a similar veneer of precipitant decline in American East Coast city life. Within less than a minute, we meet the blue collar Ray Ferrier, a harried divorced dock worker implored to return to work later in the day at the expense of time with his estranged children. The differing mise en scene illustrates an inflected post 9/11 context. Working across the bay from Manhattan, the viewer gets the immediate sense that the denizens of this blue collar

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[72] Pal in Matthews, 2007. Page 175.
[73] Flynn, 2005. Page 51.

area would witness first-hand the devastation of the terrorist attacks. This is complemented by knowing the civilian, police and local services response to 9/11. Well documented on the day were the local police and fire fighter responses, blue collar services caught up in defending Lower Manhattan, including Port Authority police John McLoughlin and William Jimeno whose harrowing experience of being trapped and injured in the towers became the subject of Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006). David Simpson notes the sense of a collective consciousness towards the blue collar victims of the attacks in relation to the press and media response:

> *The additional full pages of photographs and memorials were for the ordinary people, the firefighters, window washers, janitors, and waiters whose lives and deaths would normally have gone unrecorded by the most widely circulated paper in the United States, the newspaper of record of much of the nation. Here they were arrayed alongside the company executives and corporate leaders who also died on September 11; all were accorded the same size photograph and the same number of column inches. The Times was declaring itself at this most tragic time as a paper for all New Yorkers and all Americans and attempting to pay proper homage to the ubiquity of death and the mournful democracy of grief.[74]*

War of the Worlds incorporates much of the ordinary lives destroyed by the attacks that Simpson lists. Compared to the genial bumptiousness of the Californians of Haskin's film (on the arrival of a purported meteorite harbouring the alien invaders, one elderly gentleman comments seven minutes in that it will be "a real good attraction for Sunday drivers"), Spielberg's New Jersey characterizations prior to the alien attack are hard bitten and desperate. Cruise's Ray Ferrier is chastised for being late to see his children by his ex-wife while his home life is a resounding mess with him failing to care for his children adequately. His relationship with his son Robbie,

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[74] Simpson,2006. Page 21.

in quintessential Spielberg fashion, is tumultuous from our first viewing of the pair. While Ray attempts to bond with Robbie in a game of baseball practice, Robbie insults Ray's lack of income in contrast with his richer foster father. Absent fatherhood has proven a strong theme in post 9/11 Hollywood cinema. This theme was prevalent in Spielberg's own *Minority Report* in which John Anderton struggled over the loss of his son as well as Nolan's *Batman Begins,* where Wayne deems himself culpable for his parents' death. Douglas Kellner viewed *War of the Worlds* as "a crisis of patriarchy, with the father under attack and losing power and authority, a theme in many films of the 2000s"[75], while *9/11 Culture* author Jeffrey Melnick saw the film as a "post attack reconfiguration of the father's role."[76] By extension, masculinity is also problematized in Spielberg's film. This crisis of patriarchy can also be seen to derive from militaristic influences. Ferrier's son Robbie evinces a desire to join the US army's battle against the invaders, distraught at the destruction of the US East Coast. In an early scene, Ferrier and his family journey through the New York State countryside on the way to Boston. After stopping momentarily, Robbie sees an army convoy and yells desperately of his desire to help in the face of the alien threat. Ferrier then castigates his son's intransigence only to have him reprimand that "you only chose Boston because you hope mom is there and if she's there, you can dump us on her! You can dump us on her then you'll only have to care about yourself!"

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[75] Kellner, 2010. Page 122.
[76] Melnick, 2009. Page 130.

A moribund blue collar east coast under renewed attack in this early set piece of War of the Worlds.

Image 3: *War of the Worlds:* New Jersey under attack

Robbie's anger at Ferrier's evasions recalls the embarrassing actions of the country's leaders on the day of the 9/11 attacks. George Bush and Dick Cheney's absences in bunker and plane respectively throughout September 11th left an absence of paternalism. Robbie's desire to join the army also recalls the knee-jerk instinct of much of the country and the Bush administration following the attacks. This sense of pessimism and loss is developed in the character of Ogilivy in the third act, a father who has lost both his children from alien attack and resides in a dank cellar in rural Massachusetts. Driven insane by the devastating events, his ramblings reflect the defeat experienced on 9/11 by the United States:

> *Think about it… they defeated the greatest power in the world in a couple of days. Walked right over us. … And these are only the first, they'll keep coming. This is not a war any more than there's a war between men and maggots. This is an extermination.*

The short time frame that Ogilivy attributes to the alien attack feels parallel to the sudden events of the 9/11 attacks. This defeatism is shown by Spielberg to derive from an enemy within rather than an enemy without. In Byron Haskin's film, the 1953 invaders arrive via meteorite, crash-landing in California in order to conquer the United States. The image of the aliens arriving from without rather than within recalls the pernicious effects of Soviet and US imperialism as well as the slaughter in World War Two. This parallel is further elicited when in the film's climax, the US is forced to use atomic weaponry against the invaders (a highly modern departure from Wells's novel.) In contrast, Spielberg's film sees the invaders emerge from within the earth in a manner of retribution. Stephen Prince notes the symbiosis between the aliens' arrival and that of Mohammed Atta and his cohorts training for the 9/11 attacks: "like the 9/11 hijackers and Omar Abdel Rahman's circle of conspirators, the aliens of the film are sleeper cells lying undetected in America until they launch their attack."[77] The opening narration of the film by Morgan Freeman, drawn from Wells's novel, takes on abrupt new meaning. Referencing "intellects, vast and cool and unsympathetic" who "drew their plans against us", the words of Wells's novel strike a strong topicality with the threat of jihad against the Western world.

Spielberg's film is also topical in its allusions to the neo-conservative doctrine of Bush's foreign policy. His picture is laced with authentic neo-conservative imagery and discourse. It is revealed that one of the first countries to suffer from attack is the Ukraine, whose Orange revolution in Autumn 2004 was hailed "as a part of a wave of

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[77] Prince, 2009. Page 87.

democratization sweeping the region and the world"[78] by Bush. Administration confidence is undermined by simple references in the film. Early on, Robbie has a college paper due on the "French occupation of Algeria", an implicit parallel to Bush's on-going conducting of the Iraq War. Most cinematically transgressing are the questions asked by the children - Rachel enquires "is it terrorists?" while Robbie wonders "are they from Europe?" Whilst seemingly innocuous and silly, Robbie's question is arguably the more resonant and prescient one. It recalls diplomatic struggles and break ups over the controversy of the Iraq War, as well as the higher demographic of Muslim existence in Europe. Furthermore, only seven days after the film's release on June 30th, the horrific events of 7/7 occurred, somehow affirming Spielberg's vision of an out of touch and isolated United States. In many ways, *War of the Worlds* is a film that seems to anticipate neo-conservative decline - its pessimistic colonial and diplomatic allusions mirror the unilateralism of the Bush administration.

 Politically, *War of the Worlds* has been a receptacle for a number of liberal opinions, including by its own makers. The boldest postulation is Leighton Grist's view of the film; he saw it as a liberal discourse on neo-conservative hysteria, viewing the aliens as embodying the spectre of the Bush administration's rhetoric rather than as stand-ins for jihadists:

> *For as War of the Worlds - which expressly denies that the aliens are either 'terrorists' or from that focus of neo-conservative animus, 'Europe'- represents a USA whose very existence is imperilled by a threat that has long existed, dormant, hidden, waiting for its*

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[78]Woehrel,2005. http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/crs/rl32845.pdf
  Date accessed: 24th June 2013.

opportunity, so its narrative premise can be seen to offer a resonant metaphor for (Left) liberal American fears before an emergent, renascent, and politically virulent Right.[79]

Screenwriter David Koepp seemed to attest to this viewpoint, viewing Wells's novel as "an allegory about military adventurism."[80] A manner in which *War of the Worlds* vindicates Grist is in its largely secularizing imagery, devoid of the American exceptionalism of the Christian Right. Byron Haskin's film features notable imagery of martyrdom, encapsulated in the character of Pastor Matthew Collins who preaches peace and goodwill to the aliens from Psalm 23 before his dramatic death. The climax hinges on a sermon in a church, as if suggesting the fundamental superiority of Christian identity against godless communism. The Pastor himself peacefully quotes the Lord's prayer before his death, affirming the resilience of religious conservatism in small-town life. In stark opposition is Spielberg's film which jettisons any mention of religion. Ferrier's children never pray in the face of the disaster while Ferrier is shown to have no religious affinity. Spielberg's mise en scene is greyed and proletarian, devoid of religious benevolence, moving from the damaged blue collar suburbs of New Jersey to the later alien wracked streets of Boston. These are far from the comforting retreat of the church setting and the small town conservatism so prided in Haskin's film. This places Spielberg's film in a diaspora of liberal and secular politics, entirely separate from the provincialism of Haskin's film. Peter Biskind thought the 1950s of Haskin's *The War of the Worlds* showed that Americans believed "that their country had the endorsement of the

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[79] Grist. 2009. Pages 68- 78.
[80] Grist, 2009. Pages 68- 78.

Almighty, the Divine Seal of Approval."[81] In stark contrast, Douglas E. Cowan believes that Spielberg secularized the War on Terror, supplanting the original's West Coast conservative religiosity for a perspective closer honed to the more secular East Coast states and the industrialized England of Well's novel:

> *Spielberg avoids any real allusion to religion beyond the fact that a church is destroyed when an alien first makes its appearance. Indeed, rather than a cleric, when the main character (Tom Cruise) is hiding with his daughter in the ruined house, it is with a would be freedom fighter (Tim Robbins), whose character is modelled instead on the "survivalist-minded" artilleryman of Welles' novel.*[82]

In this regard, *War of the Worlds* is a liberal vindication for Grist as it rallies against the Christian Conservative rhetoric in the Bush administration's response to the War on Terror. This situates Spielberg's film against both Haskin's and any notion of Reaganism in post 9/11 American cinema, much like the subversive opening segment of *Batman Begins*. Spielberg's film breaks with the Reaganite themes prevalent in the jingoistic reaction to alien invasion of *Independence Day* (1996) which as Ian Scott notes, is of, "a united world in repulsing an alien invasion."[83] The Reaganite image of global co-operation is one extinguished by Spielberg. In one scene, rumours abound disseminated by ordinary citizens that "Paris went out first" only for this hypothesis to be dismissed as conjecture. The USA in Spielberg's film has lost its political allies and co-operative spirit. Distinctly un-imperial and subdominant, the America in Spielberg's film is extirpated from the imagery of conservative Cold War dominance that prevailed in the sub- genre.

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[81] Cowan, 2007. http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11no1/CowanWarWorlds.htm
Date accessed 13th June 2013.
[82] Cowan, 2007. http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11no1/CowanWarWorlds.htm
Date accessed: 13th June 2013.
[83] Scott, 2000. Page 169.

War of the Worlds also affirms the illiberal nature of the War on Terror. One of the most lugubrious scenes has Ferrier and his children attempt to board a ferry from the Hudson River to Boston. The scene recalls post 9/11 hysteria over travel and immigration with shots of screaming, panicking citizens attempting to board chaotically. Ferrier and his family barely make it on board, eluding the port authorities, conveying the anguish of post 9/11 border control. The scene represents the worst fears of post 9/11 travel and border security, taking the banality of *The Terminal's* airport security scenes and amplifying it to its extremes. The chaos entailed also imports the images of post war Iraq, neglected by the apparent insouciance and almost callous Bush administration through its images of desperate and terrified refugee escape.

These illiberal images have caused *War of the Worlds* to be interpreted and appropriated differently by the political left and right. Prince believed that the film "fails to get one of the most memorable things about 9/11, which was the impressive spirit of cooperation that prevailed at the World Trade Center amongst office workers and the first responders as the buildings were being evacuated."[84] Interestingly, Spielberg's vision found favour with those on the political right despite its pessimism. Conservative commentator Bill O' Reilly thought that the film was "influenced by the death and destruction visited upon us by the Islamic killers . . . this isn't the usual Hollywood cheap-shot leftist propaganda. *War of the Worlds* actually reflects the view of everyday Americans rather than a few Beverly Hills pinheads."[85] If so, this is ideologically depressing as *War of the Worlds*'s makers had stipulated

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[84] Prince, 2009. Page 88.
[85] Hoberman, J. 2007. Pages. 119- 135.

their film as anti-war. This appropriation by the right and castigation by the left will again recur in my case study of *The Dark Knight*. Prince's accusation of negativity on the part of the film's characterizations is a seemingly substantial one in that Spielberg's depictions are illiberal and despairing. Yet we should also consider the film in the light of a zeitgeist including the divisiveness of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Like *Minority Report*, Spielberg's illiberal images seem to evoke the discord and incrementally larger militarism of the events that followed the attacks. This illiberalism serves a progressive purpose. They also rebut O' Reilly's conservative opinions. Whilst the film has the blue collar perspective that Reilly so champions, Spielberg's depiction of the conservative institutions of the army and the family's response to all-out war are far from optimistic and warn of the hubristic rhetoric of the Bush administration.

This division of perception was reflected in the views of film critics. *Empire* writer Colin Kennedy championed the film as "dark, stormy, even gloomy, this is a distinctly autumnal blockbuster from the man who invented summer."[86] *Total Film* thought that "Spielberg finds fresh juice in a tale already adapted for film, TV, stage, radio and record."[87] Other critics were less enamoured with the film's vision. Roger Ebert considered that despite "the movie's $135 million budget, it seems curiously rudimentary"[88], while *Time Out New York* opined that "any social context or family

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[86] Kennedy, 2005. http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=10235
  Date accessed: 1st June 2013.
[87] *Total Film* Reviews. 2005. http://www.totalfilm.com/reviews/cinema/war-of-the-worlds
  Date accessed; 1st June 2013.
[88] Ebert. 2005. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/war-of-the-worlds-2005 Date accessed: 17th June 2013.

pathos seem thin or wobbly."[89] The film was a box office success, grossing almost $600 million worldwide. Along with *Batman Begins* in the summer of 2005, *War of the Worlds* was an example of a successful mainstream film which sought parallels with the post 9/11 mood regnant for years after the attacks. Yet, in some ways, the film was overshadowed by another Spielberg production that year. *Munich,* a film about the Mossad led hunt for the perpetrators of the murder of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics drew far more controversy with its terrorism themed premise. The film was accused of facile moral equivalence with its Israeli agents mirroring the actions of the Palestinian terrorists they are hunting; *The New Republic's* Leon Wieseltier wrote "the film has no place in its heart for Israel."[90] *Munich* was also in Oscar contention with a series of politically intense films including *Crash* and *Good Night, and Good Luck* which dealt with issues of post 9/11 bigotry in the former and parallels with McCarthyism and Iraq War hysteria in the latter.

Yet the dark themes and intriguingly ideological narrative of *War of the Worlds* arguably outstripped the contrived political parallels established in Spielberg's *Munich*. The Cahiers Du Cinema film journal called *War of the Worlds* its 8th best film of the noughties by the decade's end and said that "the brutality of his (Spielberg's) stories have always served the intelligence of his art."[91] In this regard, *War of the Worlds* superseded seemingly more political Oscar fare in making a seismic impact

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[89] *Time Out*. 2005. http://www.timeout.com/london/film/war-of-the-worlds   Date accessed: 17th June 2013.
[90] Stoll. 2005. http://www.nysun.com/foreign/spielbergs-munich-is-criticized/24301/ Date accessed: 18th June 2013.
[91]Burdeau, 2005. http://www.cahiersducinema.com/Critique-In-the-Shadow-of.html Date accessed: 20th June 2013.

on audience and critical consciousness. *Cahiers Du Cinema's* praise of *War of the Worlds* by the decade's end attests to its cultural and political resonance in the Bush era.

In conclusion, *War of the Worlds* captures the zeitgeist of post 9/11 America in a multitude of ways. Like *Batman Begins* and *Minority Report,* it postulates an affinity with the terrorist struck East Coast in its mise en scene and gritty city setting. It presents a secularizing storyline which belies the regnant Cold War conservatism, so prevalent in previous productions and science fiction storylines. Yet Spielberg's vision is also crucially despairing - the spirit of co-operation on the day of 9/11 is one extinct in Spielberg's film and its blue collar characters treat all strangers as suspect, in the most banal manner of post 9/11 hysteria. Yet *War of the Worlds* was in some ways the closest to an apotheosis of the mood of 2005 America, achieving wider circulation and ultimately praise than Spielberg's own *Munich*. *War of the Worlds* marked a moment when blockbuster cinema could be a model of candour in representing the mood of post 9/11 America.

Chapter 4: *The Dark Knight* and the War on Terror Beyond Bush

Christopher Nolan's 2008 film *The Dark Knight* is perhaps the most strident in its mirroring of the horrific theatres of post 9/11 terrorism and US foreign policy. Developing many earlier themes of pre-emption and unilateralism, as well as continuing Bush-era concerns over surveillance, *The Dark Knight* is tacitly seen as a definitive text of the Bush era. The reasons I attribute are disparate and complex - certainly the transmuted image of terrorism of Nolan's film, embodied in the Joker, created a charismatic and engaging receptacle for audience fears, as well as patenting an unusual and extroverted vision of Islamic jihad. Yet I also posit that the film's impact lay in its release into a time of political overture with Obama's presidential campaign generating a sense of new national direction, contrasted with a seemingly beleaguered Bush administration, bogged down in recession and foreign wars. I also argue that this film formed a pinnacle text beyond its 2008 release as its themes have been renewed in the Obama era in the continuation of Guantanamo Bay and the controversy surrounding extra judicial killings. I consider the political readings of academics and critics, some of whom, like Wall Street Journal writer Andrew Klaven, believe the film to be of the neo-conservative right; others, as in the case of Douglas Kellner, evince a dark and nihilistic discourse on the years of Bush rule. Yet I argue that *The Dark Knight's* political delineation of 2008 America transcends conventional left-right dichotomies.

The years before *The Dark Knight's* release had seen precipitous losses for the Bush administration's foreign policy. This was especially salient in the sectarian carnage taking place in Iraq. Political writers Norman Ornstein and John C. Fortier note this

sense of abject failure in their book on Bush's second term, *Second Term Blues- How George W Bush has Governed*:

> *Because Iraq's daily dose of car bombings and sectarian killings play out on television screens around the world, it is hard for Washington to make the argument that political liberty is the shortcut to prosperity and stability. At this writing nearly four years after the invasion, Iraq's electricity service is not yet up to pre-war standards and its oil sector-which was supposed to pay for the rebuilding of the country-remains in shambles.[92]*

This misfortune impacted domestically for Bush. Bush himself suffered low approval ratings in the high 20s (equivalent to Richard Nixon's ratings during Watergate) and by the end of 2006, he had lost both houses of Congress. Over the subsequent year, an economic crisis began with a credit and housing boom becoming susceptible to rising interest rates.[93] A sense of precipitous decline was overcasting America, both foreign and domestic.

This tumultuous era saw an increase in films which seemed to affirm the turbulence of the administration. As mentioned, 2005 featured a notable number of productions which fed into the post 9/11 mood from the political hysteria represented in *Good Night and Good Luck* to the Israel-Palestine conflict delineated in Spielberg's *Munich*. Films of broader context and less overt politicisation too seemed to allegorize the tumult of George W. Bush's second administration as well as attempt to capture the pessimism of the post 9/11 era. Each best picture Oscar winner from 2005 to 2007 were unusually pessimistic as Douglas Kellner conveyed in 2009:

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[92] Fortier and Ornstein, 2007. Page 73.
[93] Corrigan, 2007. Page 173.

> *Often, Oscar winning films reflect the mood and zeitgeist of an era, as when during the relatively peaceful and prosperous 1990s feel-good years affirmative films like Forrest Gump (1994), Titanic (1997), and Shakespeare In Love (1998) won Oscars. By contrast, films like the Academy Award winning productions of the last three years of the Bush-Cheney administration - Crash (2005), The Departed (2006) and No Country for Old Men (2007) - reflect a more anxiety ridden era, when events appear out of control, violence is rampant, and socioeconomic insecurities and crises are intensifying.[94]*

This insecurity also applied to more commercial fare. The 2006 comic book adaptation *V for Vendetta* has a sense of nihilism which rivals the mobster violence of *The Departed* or the morally bankrupt nature of the Texas presented in *No Country for Old Men*. A dystopian film revolving around a masked hero fighting an oppressive and totalitarian regime in London, *V for Vendetta* seemed to extrapolate the anti-terrorism rhetoric of the Bush and Blair administrations. The film harks back to 1960s era radicalism with its anti-authoritarian notions including V's memorable line of "you now have censors and surveillance, coercing your conformity." Yet the film also inverts terrorist violence. A climatic destruction of Parliament is cause for fervent celebration, enormously controversial due to the film's release soon after 7/7. Elsewhere, the monster movie sub-genre returned and transcended boundaries hitherto uncrossed since 9/11. The JJ Abrams directed *Cloverfield*, with its premise of a giant monster attack on New York City, unearthed and patented the disaster film for a post 9/11 generation with its visceral narrative structure revolving around the perspective of a handheld camera, emblematic of so many New Yorkers' experiences of the 9/11 attacks. Most vivid was the advertising campaign for the film which cleverly did not reveal the central monster, suggesting the possibility of terrorist

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[94] Kellner, 2009. Page 12.

attack. These films attracted some angered reviews with *Philadelphia Weekly* calling

V for Vendetta "fairly dim, adolescent stuff"[95] while *Cloverfield* was deemed "cheap

and opportunistic"[96] by *LA Weekly* writer Scott Foundas. Nonetheless, these films'

subject matter had thawed taboos of the post 9/11 era. (*Cloverfield* in particular

marked a return to the New York set B-movie, put on hold after 9/11 with the

exception of the global warming themed *The Day After Tomorrow.*)

It was against this backdrop that Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* sequel, *The

Dark Knight* was produced. In July 2006, Screenwriter David S. Goyer had already

penned a treatment for two sequels based on the 1988 Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale

graphic novel *The Long Halloween* which revolved around the relationship between

the Gotham City district attorney Harvey Dent and Batman in their aims to eradicate

crime from Gotham City.[97] Christopher Nolan and his brother Jonathan ultimately

condensed this into one film in a revised screenplay and ensured the Joker was a key

character. With the role of the iconic villain given to *Brokeback Mountain* star Heath

Ledger, expectations of the character were hard to fathom. Nolan's subtle casting

had effectively given him a blank canvas within which to reinvent the character for a

post 9/11 era. Only during production did Nolan's absolutist vision of the character

emerge. Nolan believed "to me the Joker is an absolute. There are no shades of gray

to him - maybe shades of purple. He's unbelievably dark. He bursts in just as he did

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[95] Burns, 2006. http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/screen/capsules-38412904.html
Date accessed: 17th June 2013.
[96] Foundas, 2008.
http://web.archive.org/web/20080118081005/http://www.laweekly.com/film+tv/film/cloverfield-is-a-horror/18158/ Date accessed: 18th June 2013.
[97] Loeb and Sale, 1988. Page 6.

in the comics."[98] This kind of evil was in stark contrast to the brash exuberance of

Jack Nicholson's Joker in Tim Burton's *Batman*. Yet Nolan attempted to establish *The*

Dark Knight as more than merely Manichean. Nolan later revealed in an IGN

interview that he was making a political film which would incorporate Gotham's

political and criminal justice institutions. He commented, "if you want to take on

Gotham, you want to give Gotham a kind of weight and breadth and depth in there.

So you wind up dealing with the political figures, the media figures. That's part of the

whole fabric of how a city is bound together."[99] Such a scope inevitably drew

comparison to the city set crime epics of *Heat,* as well as the more recent Oscar

winning Scorsese picture, *The Departed* - both films which dealt acutely with corrupt

and declining cityscapes as microcosms of modern American life.

This kind of vision naturally resonated with *The Dark Knight*'s release against a

beleaguered Bush administration. This is recounted memorably in an interview with

Nolan by *The New York Times* in March 2008. Interviewer David Halbfinger posited

that the film's notions of escalation conveyed by the Joker's arrival would "politely

be called an unintended consequence" in a "political context". Nolan's response did

nothing to dispel the notion:

> *As we looked through the comics, there was this fascinating idea*
> *that Batman's presence in Gotham actually attracts criminals to*
> *Gotham, attracts lunacy. When you're dealing with questionable*

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[98] Horowitz, 2007. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1575671/dark-knight-opening-scenes-reveal-radical-   new-joker.jhtml Date accessed: 22nd June 2013.
[99] IGN Staff, 2008. http://uk.ign.com/articles/2007/12/06/ign-interviews-christopher-nolan
   Date accessed: 17th June 2013.

> *notions like people taking the law into their own hands, you have to really ask, where does that lead?*[100]

These notions of unilateralism and escalation were introduced nascently in *Batman Begins*; yet Nolan seemed to be affirming an altogether more intensely political film. The production also had a sense of seriousness caused by the death of Heath Ledger in January 2008, a wholly unexpected tragedy. Nolan himself commented during editing that "I feel very lucky to have something productive to do, to have a performance that he was very, very proud of, and that he had entrusted to me to finish."[101] The eventual release of *The Dark Knight* was extremely hyped. Upon premiering in New York in July 2008, the film was subjected to rapturous praise with *Hollywood Reporter* writer Steven Zeitchik commenting that "the screening reaction of the media and the industry proved not just a test of the movie's drawing power- it's already expected to challenge for the biggest opening in history - but whether it could gain traction as an awards contender."[102]

Why did *The Dark Knight* elicit such passionate responses? Cynics might cite the tragic drama entailed by the post production loss of Heath Ledger. Yet it is convincing that the film struck such a chord because of its treatment of the subject of Islamic jihad in a way that was palatable to Western audiences. This is captured immediately by the place of the Joker in the film's narrative, whose plot trajectory is

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[100] Halbfinger, 2008.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/movies/09halb.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0&loadDynamically=false&commentsPosition=middle Date accessed: 16th June 2013.
[101]Carroll, 2008. http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1583563/dark-knight-stars-hope-film-celebrates-heath- ledgers-work.jhtml Date accessed: 14th June 2013.
[102] Zeitchik, 2008.
http://web.archive.org/web/20080802095431/http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/news/e3icbacc817cd9e1b4e40577f631ccf89fc Date accessed: 13th June 2013.

analogous to the rise of Al Qaeda. The opening sequence of the film sees the Joker

trick a gang of criminals (who in a web of corruption are robbing laundered money

from an unscrupulous gang in Gotham) into killing each other. The subsequent scene

sees Batman shifting attention to the robbed mob of Gotham whose corrupt

holdings have been revealed by the Joker. Batman comments on the Joker's

machinations that "he can wait". This subtle level of collusion embarked on by

Batman eventually descends into 'blowback'- after the mob's arrest, the Joker comes

to their aid by assassinating key public figures, engaging in terrorist atrocities and

demanding Batman reveal himself.

This level of collusion was anticipated in the first film with Batman's early encounter

with the Al Qaeda like The League of Shadows. *The Dark Knight* further imports this

into Gotham with the villain of the Joker in *The Dark* Knight. The Joker, like the

stereotype of Islamic terrorists, is shown to be ascetic and austere. Consistently

wearing the same scruffy clown garb and showing no appetite for political or

economic compromise, the Joker personifies the ardent nature of Islamic terrorism.

In a scene in which Wayne tries to identify the Joker's motivations, Wayne's butler

Alfred memorably sums up the Joker's philosophy in relation to a bandit he was told

of during service in colonial Burma -"some men just want to watch the world burn."

The argument that Islamic jihad is something impossible to reason with or rationalize

is one with common currency on the interventionist right with Bush commenting on

the fifth anniversary of the attacks that "they're successors to fascists, to Nazis, to

communists and other totalitarians of the 20th century, and history shows what the

outcome will be."[103] This imperviousness to rationalization or understanding is ultimately revealed in the third act, in a scene in which the Joker retrieves the mob's money that was once in the hands of Gotham's police, only to memorably burn his half of the money to which he is entitled, as well as to betray the Gotham mobsters for whom he was purportedly working. Sudipto Sanyal connects this scene to the hatred of Western capital and competition in Islamist ideologies:

> *The Joker despises criminals who only seek financial self-advancement - it is very likely that he shares this with the Islamic terrorists. He burns a huge pile of mob money - with Lau on top - saying to the Chechen….: All you care about is money. This town deserves a better class of criminals. I'm going to give it to them (…) It's not about money. It's about sending a message. Everything burns! As such, also the Joker's strikes are not completely motiveless but are aimed at showing a society, in his view drowning in self-righteousness, that is in reality them, who are the perpetrators. It also includes the suggestion that the days of the older types of criminals - those who only seek riches or power- are over. The age of the new generation of terrorism has begun.[104]*

This Joker inverts conventional expectations of the comic book villain - in Tim Burton's *Batman*, The Joker dispenses $20 million in order to fool Gotham citizens into a slaughtering trap. The Joker of Nolan's universe, as Sanyal conveys, has a methodology divested of ostentatious display. Indeed, his philosophy accelerates the austere Ra's Al Ghul's Bin Laden style castigation of Western vulgarity. As noted above, *The Dark Knight* adopts elements of the neo-conservative philosophy and attributes a nihilistic and ascetic discourse to the terrorist way of thinking. This kind of superiority recalls David Simpson's argument against the rhetoric of the Bush

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[103] Bush. 2006. http://www.cggl.org/scripts/document.asp?id=46272
    Date accessed: 14th June 2013.
[104] Durand and Leigh, 2009, page 74.

administration which excoriated the executive office for its labelling of inferiority

against Islamist terrorists:

> *The attribution of nihilism or nothingness (despite Osama bin Laden's explicit demands for specific changes to US foreign policy) creates a space for speculation and interpretation that is literally inexhaustible. In the light of this construction of nothing, of inviting emptiness, everything becomes a possible motive: the attack may then be the result of jealousy, of them wanting what we have and destroying it because they cannot have it (they hate our freedom); or it may be the result of an absolute negation, of "them" responding to an intransigent fundamentalism wholly foreign to our professed ethic of tolerance.*[105]

Simpson's kind of reasoning and rationalization is presented as the enemy in *The*

Dark Knight and is attempted by various quarters of Gotham society. The mob

believes that the Joker can be bought and persuaded to their aid with money in spite

of being "a freak". The character of Bruce Wayne himself tries to psychoanalyse the

villain for his motivations. Yet this is counteracted by the Joker's incrementally

convoluted persona. In multiple scenes, the Joker spins yarns and fabrications about

his past that are virtually interchangeable. In one fluid scene, he comments on how

his alcoholic father abused him and then rapidly moves on to his poor emotional

treatment of his wife and the origin of the hideous scars he beholds. These kinds of

fraught anecdotes spun by the Joker mirror the staunch beliefs of neo-conservatives

that Islamist thought and motivation is fundamentally irrational. Most horrifically

authenticated is the Joker's employment of Al Qaeda style execution videos. In one

scene, the Joker screens a torture video of him killing a vigilante in order to goad

Batman to reveal his identity. The scene holds comparisons with the filmed murder

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[105] Simpson, 2006. Page 7.

of Daniel Pearl in 2002, as well as the video executions in Iraq by the regional Al

Qaeda leader Zarqawi. Filmed in grainy black and white and harsh close ups of the

victim, the video is broadcast on Bruce Wayne's city apartment television, importing

the gritty and assumed third world context of Islamist torture into an American

consciousness. By finally cutting out at the point of the murder as if too horrific, this

scene draws explicit parallels between the Joker and Batman's war and Bush's

broader war on Islamist terror.

Yet the Joker is also fundamentally complex, recalling older styles of terrorism, as

well as being imbued with a frightening charisma, making him far more of an enigma

than the villain of Ra's Al Ghul. In February 2008, Costume designer Linda Hemming

noted in an interview with IGN magazine that she drew aspects of the Joker's style

from "the Sex Pistols and Johnny Rotten."[106] The 1970s punk rock stylization of the

Joker arguably tempers the controversial and more abrasive elements of Islamic

terrorism. It is also not merely aesthetic. For all the character's jihadist invocations,

Nolan's Joker is comported to fit broader readings and notions of terrorism. The

villain regularly invokes the spirit of the left wing terrorism of the 1960s and 1970s -

in one scene the Joker notes the importance of "introducing a little anarchy",

drawing comparisons with the grassroots American terrorist groups of The

Weathermen and the Black Panthers. Alfred's statement of "some men want to

watch the world burn" when referring back to his time as an imperial officer in

Burma also recall the ideological battles over the Vietnam War, placing the Joker

within a context of third world uprisings. These conflations orchestrated by Nolan

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[106]Hemmings, 2008. http://uk.ign.com/articles/2008/02/25/dressing-the-joker
   Date accessed: 5th June 2013.

temper the controversy elicited by the film's post 9/11 themes, as well as providing a broader pantheon to condemn terrorist violence. Moreover, in the style of neo-conservatives, they contextualize and castigate the Islamist enemy as one with precedent and thus one that can be defeated.

Yet *The Dark* Knight, fundamentally in common with its predecessor and the themes presented by Spielberg's post 9/11 works, highlights the perils of Bush administration practices and circumventions. This is most clearly encapsulated in a Guantanamo style torture scene in the second act, in which Batman and Commissioner Gordon collaborate to hold the Joker indefinitely in a Gotham police cell and subject him to a brutal beating. This is done in the context of the 'ticking time bomb scenario'- both Batman's ally of district attorney Harvey Dent and love interest Rachel Dawes have been kidnapped somewhere in Gotham and are under threat. This stark scene recalls the most violent elements of extraordinary rendition and the culture of Guantanamo Bay. In harsh, brutal close ups, Batman proceeds to pummel and assault the Joker furiously for information. For all the strident rhetoric against terrorism in Nolan's film, this scene highlights the ugliness of much counterterrorist policy. The consistent beating Batman gives the Joker only yields laughter and amusement from him, the information finally being revealed when the Joker wants it to be known. Most thematically elicited in the scene is the notion of moral equivalence. The Joker notes capriciously to Batman that "they are ahead of the curve", implying a mutual reciprocity between the extreme interventionism of Batman and the wanton destruction of the Joker. This premise rejects the Bush administration's argument of innate Western superiority, explicitly suggested in the

barbarous nature of Batman's conduct. This image evokes the global concerns of

torture by many liberal politicians including former Canadian opposition leader

Michael Ignatieff, who conveyed the philosophy of innate superiority as justification

for torture: "A lesser evil morality is antiperfectionist in its assumptions. It accepts as

inevitable that it is not always possible to save human beings from harm without

killing other human beings."[107]

Throughout *The Dark Knight*, we see Batman veer towards this "lesser evil morality".

The Joker postulates that Batman will have to break his "one rule" of not killing in

order to break the Joker. For all the evil of the terrorism of the Joker, extremism too

applies to ostensibly good guys. This is salient in the film's treatment of the issue of

surveillance. In the film's third act, Batman utilises a city-wide tracking device to

reveal the location of the Joker, thereby giving him unprecedented power in being

able to spy on any citizen of Gotham. Earlier, Bruce Wayne had asked Alfred what

had been done to track down the bandit in the forests of Rangoon. Alfred quietly

noted that "we burned the forest", anticipating the draconian surveillance program

Batman will incorporate as well as the Patriot Act legislation of the Bush

administration. Alfred's dialogue also recalls the destruction of the Vietnam War,

comparable to the imperialism of the War on Terror. The tracking device

employment references the use of wireless wiretapping by the Bush administration

as Batman delves through numerous phone conversations whilst conducting his

search. Yet the search is flawed. It emerges the Joker's crew has taken hostages and

the tracking device does not distinguish between hostages and captors, creating

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[107] Ignatiaff in Simpson, 2006. Page 151.

room for grave error. Comisky, in his article 'The Hero We Read' notes a multiplicity

of readings for viewers which depend acutely on their politics:

> *Those who read the film as a validation of Bush policy can say that*
> *it shows how limited incursions into civil liberties are sometimes*
> *necessary to maintain freedom: those who read the film as a*
> *critique of neo-conservative policy can argue that the limited use of*
> *Bat-Sonar differentiates it from warrantless wiretapping, which*
> *members of the Bush administration have suggested should go*
> *unchecked and be instituted permanently.*[108]

'Fight the monster, lest you become the monster': The extreme dichotomies of the War on Terror shown in this Guantanamo style interrogation

Image 4: *The Dark Knight* interrogation scene

This division of opinion has applied acutely to academic response. Douglas Kellner

considered the film a critique of Bush-Cheney policies and called the film a "murky

political allegory that suggests going over to the Dark Side twists and corrupts

individuals and society."[109] In stark contrast, Hassler-Frost viewed the film as chiefly

reductive in its ideological juxtaposition of the choice of Batman or the Joker,

constituting "ideological manipulation through limitation." He noted of the film's

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[108] Durand and Leigh, 2009. Page 134.
[109] Kellner, 2009. Page 11.

politics that "the preferred option can consistently be described as the opting for the lesser of two evils."[110]

There is substantial evidence for both Kellner and Hassler-Frost's views. *The Dark Knight* disparages Batman's techniques but also posits no other real alternative to the strategies of the titular character. In many ways, these views are reconcilable. *The Dark Knight* is a moribund and dark treatise on the comic book movie with little manoeuvre for great change - the radical conclusion of *V for Vendetta* in which Parliament is destroyed is political anathema in Nolan's universe in which terrorism must be stopped but in only the most retrograde and compromised ways. Yet what the readings of both Kellner and Hassler-Frost neglect is that Nolan's film cannot simply be confined to the discourse of the Bush era. Because, as captured in the key character of district attorney Harvey Dent, *The Dark Knight* can also be analysed in the context of the then upcoming Obama administration as well as the immediate history of eight years of Bush.

The character of Harvey Dent represents a more polished, less unilateralist alternative to Batman. His soaring rhetoric is not unlike that of Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 (given that *The Dark Knight* was filmed in 2007 when Hilary Clinton was still the favourite Democratic candidate, this likeness was fortuitous). Dent notes in front of a crowd of wearied Gotham citizens that "the night is darkest just before the dawn" and that "the dawn is coming". This tempestuous language would hardly look amiss in Obama's 2009 inauguration speech in which he orated that:

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[110] Hassler-Frost, 2011. Page 144.

> *"Forty four Americans have now taken the presidential oath. The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace. Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms."[111]*

Although primarily referring to the unforgiving recession, this language nonetheless carried a currency following eight years of war. Dent positions himself similarly as a reform, left of center candidate, who successfully puts criminals behind bars without resorting to the circumventions of Batman. Yet in some instances, Dent is not always the clear-cut reformer he purports to be. In a dinner table conversation with Bruce Wayne and Wayne's ex girlfriend Rachel Dawes (who is, in a narrative contrivance, now romantically involved with Dent), he reveals a hidden admiration of Batman's philosophy. He declares "Gotham City is proud of an ordinary citizen standing up for what is right" in contrast with more orthodox politicians who are doomed to his rule of "either you die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain". This side of Dent is further evinced in a scene in which he aggressively interrogates a criminally insane worker for the Joker, only to be admonished by Batman and warned that these actions compromise Dent's 'clean' image. Dent's earlier fatalistic attitude towards Gotham politics prove prescient in the film's second half, as he and Rachel are betrayed by corrupt police who place them in buildings rigged to explode for the Joker. Whilst Rachel is killed, an emotionally devastated and physically scarred Dent is saved by Batman. After escaping from hospital (with some outside manipulation from The Joker), he enacts violent retribution against mob bosses and his police traitors. Dent's arc culminates tragically with him psychotically holding

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[111] Obama, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&loadDynamically=false&commentsPosition=middle&_r=0 Date accessed: 18th June 2013.

hostage the family of Commissioner Gordon only to be stopped and inadvertently killed by Batman who takes the responsibility for Dent's death as well as Dent's own private revenges.

The fact that notions of lawful political reform are eliminated in *The Dark Knight* is controversial as well as depressing. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, Dent's arc seems less exaggerated thematically speaking. The Obama administration over the past five years has engaged in promiscuous use of drone strike assassination programs besides having extended Bush era surveillance. The film's premise that the reform minded become fallible is feasible and cogent when looked at through the prism of the post Bush era. The film's final scene, in particular, cements this tragic theme. Converging the Bush and Obama eras, the scene sees Dent hold Gordon's family hostage atop the burnt and blackened building where Rachel was killed. Dent notes the building's significance in a manner that recalls the scarring effect of Ground Zero. With the use of Dent, Nolan conveys that the trauma of terrorism holds a power to affect and destroy any considerable public figure. Dent's subsequent death leads to a self-perpetuating cycle when Batman decides to take the blame for the chaos wrought by Dent. A guarded military industrial complex would again resume itself in the Obama era, evidenced by the lack of closure of Guantanamo Bay and the very recent NSA controversies. The film's unresolved ending in which Batman speeds away from the crime scene, pursued by police into a dark Gotham tunnel, hints at this continual discord. Far from partisan, Nolan's film seems depressingly accurate in its acknowledgement of the prevalence of post 9/11 discourse for the immediate future.

Yet critics generally perceived the film ideologically, with some praising the film's bold politics and others disparaging Nolan's politicization. Roger Ebert called *The Dark Knight* a "haunted film that leaps beyond its origins and becomes an engrossing tragedy."[112] Jonathan Lethem of *The New York Times* meanwhile chided the film's dark politics, calling it "a cognitively dissonant milkshake of rage, fear and, finally, absolving confusion."[113] In huge contrast, the conservative Wall Street Journal writer Andrew Klaven praised the film as pro-Bush and argued that "*The Dark Knight* is making a fortune depicting the values and necessities that the Bush administration can't seem to articulate for beans."[114] Klaven and Lethem seemed to have both perceived the film too ideologically. Perhaps the ultimate testament to the success of *The Dark Knight* is its thematic flexibility - the film testifies to a regnant discourse of political fear and terror which has renewed itself in the Obama years.

However, the resonance of the film cannot be confined simply to its bold themes. The film also benefited from its traditional post 9/11 setting of a seemingly East Coast American city, like its predecessor and *War of the Worlds*, an iconographic locale which still held a resonance in the last Bush year of 2008. The film's haunting imagery of exploding hospitals and burnt out buildings was not unfamiliar. Compared to the foray of the lighter hearted *Iron Man* in May 2008, which attempted to take the titular Marvel Comics superhero to Afghanistan, Nolan sharpened and extrapolated an already working blockbuster formula. The visionary

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[112] Ebert. 2008. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-dark-knight-2008 Date accessed: 1st July, 2013.
[113] Lethem. 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/opinion/21lethem.html?pagewanted=all&loadDynamically=false&commentsPosition=middle&_r=0 Date accessed: 2nd July 2013.
[114] Klaven. 2008. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121694247343482821.html Date accessed: 10th June 2013.

portrayal of the Joker led to subsequent costume imitations and an Oscar victory for

Ledger, a rarity for a Comic book film. Although enormously successful in grossing

$600 million[115] to *The Dark Knight's* $1 billion[116], *Iron Man* was criticized for using an

Afghanistan war setting incongruously for its storyline with David Denby of the *New

York Times* calling the film "enraging" and opining that "more Americans will see this

dunderheaded fantasia on its opening weekend than have seen all the features and

documentaries that have labored to show what's happening in Iraq and on the home

front." [117] For all the heated controversies prompted by Nolan's film, *The Dark Knight*

had affirmed a simple ethos of a domestic East Coast setting with integrated and

well established post 9/11 themes. The incongruity viewed in *Iron Man* proved that

simple transgressions could constitute major affronts. Nolan's film had

simultaneously played it bold and safe.

The Dark Knight continued to revitalize the staples of the post 9/11 blockbuster in a

variety of ways. Nolan's film affirmed the mise en scene of an east coast setting as

well as providing an effective allegorical embodiment of terrorism in the Joker.

However, *The Dark Knight's* narrative also signalled the ending of the Bush regime

whilst foreboding the continuation of present turbulence into the next. Appearing in

the middle of Bush's last year, many writers perceived the film as an apologia for the

past eight years of Bush rule. With hindsight,*The Dark* Knight has proved

thematically resonant in conveying the recursive power of terrorism in its open

[115] IMDB. 2008. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0371746/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus
Date accessed: 2nd July 2013.
[116]IMDB. 2008 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/business?ref_=tt_dt_bus
Date accessed: 2nd July 2013.
[117] Corrigan, 2012. Page 203.

ended conclusion. In Nolan's universe, the regnant discourses ushered in by the Bush

administration are there to stay.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these case studies captured the zeitgeist of the Bush administration in a variety of complex and curious ways. They proffered a subversive take on the War on Terror narrative, rebutting positions disseminated by neo-conservatives. *Batman Begins'*s conflicted all-American protagonist, who is, like Bush, a unilateralist and an interventionist, has his antecedence in an organization analogous to Al Qaeda. *Minority Report*, though filmed prior to the attacks, provided a counterpoint to new illiberal legislation and a sense of national disorientation, whilst showcasing a suitably moribund dystopian narrative. Spielberg utilized sensational images of the chaotic East Coast in *War of the Worlds* to make salient points about the atavistic militarism engulfing post 9/11 America in the wake of the Bush administration first term's imperial and civil liberties onslaught. Finally, *The Dark Knight* renewed these discourses by affirming the impossibility of reform in an open-ended conclusion that conveys the notion of 'endless war.'

These films were visually distinctive - they generated a mise en scene tradition of an East Coast city setting, a distinctly autumnal veneer and a sense of national neglect and decline. Most palpable in these images was a secular response; the church has received short shrift in all these films and *Minority Report's* notions of "metaphysics" are narratively and thematically repudiated. Spielberg and Nolan are pessimistic about the prospects of American renewal and refuse to apply Reaganite notions of American exceptionalism and superiority in their narratives. *War of the Worlds* and Nolan's *Batman* films revolutionize and jettison their more conservative predecessors of *The War of the Worlds* and Joel Schumacher's 1990s *Batman* films.

Further, these films also demonstrate scepticism towards any political change, pessimistic of the prospects of new government. This pattern is above all affirmed in *The Dark Knight*, in a year of "hope and change"- the tragic fate of Harvey Dent heightens the folly of the audacity of hope. The zeitgeist was captured by these Hollywood films in a variety of ways - a critical and depressing discourse against the War on Terror, a resonant narrative pattern of familiar post 9/11 locale and imagery and perhaps most revolutionary of all, a far more cynical position towards the powers of the executive branch and any capacity for its change.

19,985 words (excluding references)

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